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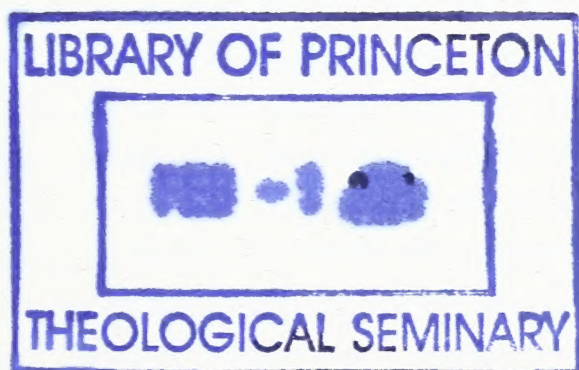
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Interpretation and Imagination

*The Preacher and
Contemporary Literature*

CHARLES L. RICE



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PHILADELPHIA

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ABOUT THE PREACHER'S PAPERBACK LIBRARY

The renewal of the church in our time has touched many aspects of parish life: liturgy and sacraments, biblical and theological concern, the place of the laity, work with small groups. But little has been said or done with regard to the renewal of the church in the pulpit.

The Preacher's Paperback Library is offered in the hope that it will contribute to the renewal of the preaching ministry. It will not stoop to providing "sermon starters" or other homiletical gimmicks. It will, rather, attempt to hold in balance the emphasis which contemporary theologians and biblical scholars lay upon the centrality of proclamation and the very practical concerns of theological students and parish pastors who are engaged in the demanding task of preparing sermons of biblical and theological depth which also speak to the contemporary world.

To that end, the series will provide reprints of fundamental homiletical studies not presently available and contemporary studies in areas of immediate concern to the preacher. Moreover, because the study of sermons themselves can be of invaluable help in every aspect of the preparation of the sermon, volumes of sermons with introductory notes will appear from time to time. The sermons will include reprints of outstanding preachers in the past as well as sermons by contemporary preachers who have

given evidence both of depth and of imaginative gifts in communication. It is our hope that each volume in The Preacher's Paperback Library, prepared with the specific task of sermon preparation in mind, will contribute to the renewal of the preaching ministry.

It is a commonplace to observe that contemporary literature and drama provide far more accurate and sensitive insights into the dilemmas of life than are found in most sermons. *Interpretation and Imagination*, by Charles Rice, explores the possibilities for the enrichment of preaching offered by various types of contemporary literature and drama. Combining a love for and sensitivity to art, theological depth, and an appreciation for the homiletical task in today's world, the analytical chapters in this book make for provocative and rewarding reading.

The illustrative sermons concluding the volume are invaluable because they actually translate into the doing of sermons that which has been discussed in the preceding pages. Dr. Rice is a stimulating and imaginative preacher. Having dared to illustrate his points with his own sermons, he successfully provides concrete examples of his analysis of the problems and possibilities in relating literature and drama to the homiletical task.

The book is commended to preachers and students of preaching who would enrich their preaching through the resources of contemporary literary art.

EDMUND A. STEIMLE

Union Theological Seminary
New York, New York
Pentecost, 1970

PREFACE

As a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary in 1962, I participated in a seminar in doctrinal preaching. The course aimed to produce sermons on the classical Christian doctrines: Trinity, Atonement, Justification, Last Judgment. Each of the ten students was assigned three doctrines upon which to write sermons. Those which fell to me were Grace, Priesthood of Believers, and Second Coming, about all of which I had ample notes from seminary courses in systematic theology. The task promised to be not too difficult if as dull as most of the doctrinal preaching I had heard.

But there was a catch, one which I might have expected, having heard the professor's timely talks on "The Protestant Hour"; the emphasis of the course was on being up-to-date. The seminar was impatient with the conventional approach to doctrinal preaching. A rehearsal of systematic theology would not do. As the class heard one sermon after another it found the specialized language of dogmatic theology both tedious and uncommunicative, a kind of glib jargon which seemed neither to express the preacher's personal faith nor to engage his hearers where they lived. Consequently, a rubric developed: we were to preach doctrinal sermons while using as little of the language of dogmatic theology as possible. Theological words, it appeared, were inadequate to express Christian theology in the pulpit.

We could no longer assume that the theological vocabulary—sin, salvation, Holy Spirit, conversion—held any meaningful content for the average churchgoer, to say nothing of persons outside the church. The preacher could not move directly from the seminary classroom to the pew. In the pulpit some special intermediate movement must occur.

The question was: How does one preach on the cardinal doctrines without resort to time-honored theological language? The answer to that question was far from apparent to me. I had grown up in a church which knew and used the language of Zion. The preacher in that tradition assumed that Pauline terminology could carry the weight of sermonic communication. If the preacher wished to speak of sin and salvation he need not mince words. In fact, when one went to church he expected to hear an esoteric language, speech reserved for a unique activity in an equally unique setting. Homiletical language was distinguished not only by the unction with which it was spoken but also by its vocabulary. How else could one speak of God and his ways with men than in theological language? Who were we to think that we could improve upon Paul?

Nurtured in such a tradition, close to the traditional language, I now found myself in a new situation. Here were fellow ministers who questioned the homiletical adequacy of theological language for the very reason that they took both preaching and theology seriously. The professor, steeped in the dogmatic and homiletical tradition of Luther, did the work of a theologian as purposefully as he preached to the worldly businessman or the nominally Christian housewife who might happen to tune in on "The

Protestant Hour." In that new situation, where the task of preaching led to theological seriousness *and* cultural awareness, I came to rethink the role of the preacher.

For homiletical purposes, I had to that time identified the Word of God with the Bible and with the theological vocabulary derived from it. Theological words had been reified to the degree that the content of the gospel had become indistinguishable from that vocabulary. Given such a static notion of the Word, the role of the preacher was easily defined: he transmitted the biblical and theological vocabulary. An equation might represent his relation to the Word:

$$\frac{\text{Preacher}}{\text{Word of God}} = \frac{\text{Lecturer}}{\text{Historical Text}}$$

The analogy is, of course, oversimplified. Such an equation does suggest, however, the role assigned the preacher when the Word of God is equated with the Bible and doctrinal formulations. In this role, the preacher aims to transmit and clarify biblical texts and to instruct his congregation in dogmatic language.

But the seminar in doctrinal preaching would not allow such a job description for the preacher. We found the biblical-theological vocabulary incapable of carrying the gospel to our contemporaries. Any equation between that vocabulary and the gospel was simply untenable. It became apparent that many persons today are quite open to the gospel but completely impervious to biblical and theological terminology. In fact, we came to think that such words as "sin" and "salvation" were not only shopworn

but corrupted by misuse and overuse to the point of subverting the gospel.

While participating in that unsettling seminar I was also writing a thesis on Karl Barth's theology of preaching. Reflection which began during that seminal year led to a new understanding of the Word of God and of the preacher's role in relation to the Word. It has become clear that the Word of God is dynamic; it happened in the church and it is still happening. Behind the Bible and theological language is an event, an event to which we, under the tutelage of the Bible and theology, witness. A new equation emerges:

$$\frac{\text{Preacher-Theologian}}{\text{Word of God}} = \frac{\text{Actor-Critic}}{\text{Play}}$$

In this analogy, the play is to be understood as the actual performance. The Word of God is an event. The preacher participates in that event and leads others to participation. Not only is he a participant, but in his role as a theologian he is critic as well, constantly seeking to understand his Christian experience and to correct his witness to it. If one accepts such an analogy, then the preacher's task takes on new dimensions and new excitement. The preacher becomes not so much a transmitter and teacher as a leader and celebrant.

No doubt, the preacher does have a continuing obligation to renew the language around which the community coheres. But that is not the primary aim of preaching. As a matter of fact, the sermon's length and the meager pedagogical possibilities of the monological pulpit will not

allow the preacher to teach systematic theology on Sunday morning. And even if it were the aim of preaching to be didactic, the preacher would still face the question: *How* can we give meaning to theological words?

Since 1962, continued experience in the work of preaching has led me to think that the preacher's vocation is translation, the apt and artful presentation of the gospel in contemporary idiom. The saving grace of Christian communication today is imagination, that habit of mind which can move from one's own situation into a new frame of reference, enriching both "worlds" by the very movement. Amid accelerating change, the preacher can no longer take for granted the strategic adequacy of his location within the world of the Bible and theology. It is true that responsibility to the church as a historical community orients him toward the world of the Bible and its language, but his attendant responsibility to the church as a community moving through history lays on him the vocation of imaginative translation.

The preacher as translator moves between two poles: identity and continuity. On the one hand, he belongs to a community whose identity depends upon the special language of Zion. One cannot divorce what the Christian community feels itself to be from the distinctive linguistic formulations by which the church has described itself in dogma and liturgy. On the other hand, the church's identity as the body of Jesus Christ necessarily implies its continuity *in* the world.* To be the church, then, is to be at once oriented toward the biblical witness to Jesus and moving

* James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 64ff.

toward the world with every expectation of meeting Christ there. Whereas the primary movement of the minister as theologian is inward, toward deeper understanding of the tradition and identification with the church, the thrust of his particular work as a preacher is outward toward the world.

In this movement, he may unguardedly identify himself so closely with the situation to which he speaks that he loses his distinctive role as a Christian minister. Or, on the other hand, he may stay so close to traditional dogmatic formulation as to be inflexible in changing conditions. He cannot do the work of translation if he gravitates out of control to either pole. But it is not always apparent in the *method* of preaching that Christian faith is necessarily implied. The risk that a new form of preaching may not be readily identified with the Christian tradition is at once the scandal and the promise of imaginative, creative homiletical work.

Concurrently with that germinal seminar in homiletics, I took a course in "Christian Faith and Modern Fiction." That course was my formal introduction to the study of theology and literature. As the class moved from Dostoevsky and Melville to Penn Warren, Greene, Camus, and Faulkner, the seminar in doctrinal preaching was forcing me to look for nontheological expressions of Christian faith. The possibility of preaching within a new frame of reference, the world of literature, only gradually came into view. The result was a sermon inspired by Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, especially by Dilsey's understanding, born out of her suffering, of St. John's apocalyptic vision. Though changed considerably from its first form, that ser-

mon remains for me the most satisfactory expression of the meaning of the doctrine of the second coming of Christ.

There can be no doubt that the environment in which I studied in 1962/63 was conducive to the meeting of preaching and contemporary literature. Union Theological Seminary is as excellent a theological school as New York is a worldly, highly secular city. A young preacher living in those two worlds—each one overlapping while remaining distinct from the other—could hardly avoid the secularization of the strictly biblical-textual preaching in which he had been reared and trained. At the same time, the proximity of seminary and secular city made for the clarification of theology, for new and deeper understanding of the biblical tradition. The same sort of mutual contribution occurred between the seminar in doctrinal preaching and the course in theology and literature, the one illuminating and probing the other.

Since those beginnings as a seminarian, I have become more aware of the value of dialogue between theology and literature and of the special importance of contemporary literature to preaching. Nathan Scott is quite right:

The theological act occurs in the act whereby the truth of distinctively Christian faith is set forth and clarified, but occurs also, and perhaps in certain ways even more critically, in the moment when this particular faith is required to define and understand itself in relation to the general fund of human wisdom about what is important in man's life on this earth.*

If that is the case, then preaching is not only a viable but a unique theological act where Christian truth articulates

* Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *Adversity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 15.

itself in relation to "what is important in man's life on this earth."

Accordingly, this book intends to introduce preachers to contemporary writers, to mark out a theological place for that meeting, and to provide rubrics for the homiletical treatment of literature. It is hoped that the representative sermons which appear at the end of the book will serve as exemplary tutors.

My students, by their enthusiasm and friendly scepticism, have helped me to see new possibilities for interpreting the tradition. I wish to thank them, and my colleagues, especially Professor Stuart C. Henry, who have encouraged me. I am indebted to Mrs. Linda McFalls for preparing the typescript, and to Dr. Thomas Fitzgerald, who read the work with the devotion of a friend.

CHARLES L. RICE

Ash Wednesday, 1970

Durham, North Carolina

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To
Harold Cooke Phillips
and
Ruth Turner Phillips



The Homiletical Task: Where Faith Meets Culture

PREACHING HAS, IN THE main, started and stayed in the Bible. The Protestant tendency has been toward allegiance, whether actual or token, to the text as such. Though in some quarters texts are little more than pretexts, the Sunday morning sermon is likely to give at least lip service to an announced biblical passage.

Both preacher and congregation, assuming that the Bible intends to be preached, have too frequently missed the biblical intention to meet men where they are. It is clear that the Bible reflects vastly more of the culture in which it was born than does much contemporary preaching. The preacher may treat the text assiduously or cursorily, but he is likely, in one way or another, to let it be known that he intends to preach with reference to a passage of Scripture. On the other hand, few preachers are so consistent in meeting the contemporary scene. Many a sermon, perhaps thirty minutes in length, betrays little cultural awareness in the preacher. The sermon often suggests a man who reads the Bible or, at least, knows the texts in it, but who does not go to plays, read novels, see movies, or for that matter read

the papers, watch television, or live with people on Main Street and in his own home.

God did not stop speaking when his book went to press. Far from it; he speaks to men today in unlikely burning bushes and in equally unlikely books. The Bible itself, in its method and material, suggests that the divine way of speaking is dynamic, historically oriented, and consistently updated. The biblical preachers, including Jesus, intending to communicate the experience of faith, spoke to their contemporaries in the concrete images of the world at hand. The specific task of communicating the gospel led them at once to the willingness to range through the world and speak of God in terms of that world. There can be no question about the meeting of Christianity and culture in the biblical witness to God's work in Jesus Christ. Edmund Steimle is quite right: "The sermon which starts in the Bible and stays in the Bible is not Biblical."¹ God does speak through his book, but that book itself reveals that he also speaks elsewhere.

It is the greatest irony that *preaching* should divorce religion and culture. And that irony is heightened when one understands the historical particularity and the cultural richness of the Bible, the very book which has become the focus of a tacit preoccupation with texts. The very intention of preaching, as of the Bible, is engagement of men where they are. And where men are is culture.

Religion and Culture

The preacher has a special interest in the relationship between religion and culture. It was a preaching theolo-

¹ Edmund Steimle, James A. Gray Lectures, Duke University, November 1966.

gian, Paul Tillich, whose work, like his life style, opened up to the churchman the religious significance of contemporary culture. Tillich, always a man "on the boundary," following in the way of Schleiermacher, met the world as a man of faith and spoke of the faith as a man of the world. What he actually experienced as a Christian disciple led him to take culture seriously, that is, as manifesting the religious, without taking it with final seriousness, that is, as having sanctity within itself. What Tillich lived through in Nazi Germany would not allow the latter, that is, the worship of culture. But, on the other hand, what Tillich saw in painting, depth psychology, music, literature, and science would not allow him to speak of God as if he had nothing to do with the modern world of man's making. Without equating religion and culture, Tillich learned by unimpeachable human experience that they are inextricable. A man of the world, he could not deny experience. Tillich's reverent secularity and worldly faith drove him to articulate the relationship between theology and culture, to preach in everyday words and in the language of philosophy, psychology, and art.²

His personal experience and cultural interests having denied him a safe place behind stained glass, Tillich moved toward redefinition of "religion." Inevitably, that definition made room for cultural expression of the religious. To be religious, said Tillich, is to be ultimately concerned, to respond in the depths of one's being to what is profound in human experience. By this definition, the opposite of religious feeling is indifference, superficiality, aloof detachment from the concerns of men and women. In this understand-

² Cf. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner's, 1948).

ing of "religion," poetry, politics, and preaching become of a piece in their involvement in man's situation. It is precisely this definition which drives the church to develop a theology of culture and, in the particular concern of this book, compels the preacher to a fresh appreciation for the world which, for want of a better term, we designate as "secular." Failure in this enterprise, the reconciliation of culture and religion, may bar the church and her preachers from a vast range of human experience. Wherever the church is cut off from the contemporary situation it falls into dogmatic idolatry and its preachers into irreligious sermonizing.

By "dogmatic idolatry" is meant the church's tendency to harden and then to apotheosize theological formulations, institutional church life, and the biblical literature in such a way as to estrange itself from man's nonchurchly, cultural expression of religion. Tillich insists, against this churchly chauvinism, that both institutional religion and cultural forms are tentative, emergency measures made necessary by man's estrangement from the true ground of his being. That is to say, both culture and church point beyond themselves to truth, to reality as men meet it under many guises.

The church serves well where it reveals and keeps in view the depths of man's life, reminding him, for example, that he is more than a cog in the industrial machine, bringing him to meeting with the ground of his being. But the church itself succumbs to idolatry when it fails to differentiate between religion in its broad and narrow definitions. Tillich writes of such a church:

It makes itself the ultimate and despises the secular realm. It makes its myths and doctrines, its rites and laws into ulti-

mates and persecutes those who do not subject themselves to it. It forgets that its own existence is a result of man's tragic estrangement from his true being. It forgets its own emergency character.³

Tillich asks the church to show a proper humility, consonant with the nature of religious experience, to keep in mind that doctrine, institutional forms, and Holy Scripture are at best efforts to articulate the sense of God in the depths of man's life. Here is the crucial importance of Tillich's understanding of the symbol as that which points beyond itself to a reality for which and in which it stands. The symbol is to be taken seriously because it does actually participate in that to which it points. But the symbol is not taken with absolute seriousness just because it does finally *point*. The church's symbols point to the ground of man's being; the church falls into idolatry when the symbols are confused with that to which they point.

The homiletical form of dogmatic idolatry is irreligious sermonizing, that is, preoccupation with the sermon as such and with traditional forms rather than with the present situation in which persons might be met with a moving word. The sermon becomes a symbol turned toward itself. Such conventional preaching, bent upon giving sermons rather than meeting people now, upon filling the time rather than fulfilling it, actually becomes opaque rather than transparent to the Word of God. That theology of culture which, by contrast, takes the secular world seriously will meet a given congregation with quite a different intention and, therefore, in quite a different way.

This present attempt to bring the preacher to contemporary literature and contemporary literature to the pulpit,

³ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 9.

is based on the presupposition that the Word of God breaks out in cultural forms. Tillich makes room for such a presupposition in his axiom on religion and culture: "Religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion."⁴ Religion, the substance of culture, is at the depths of all human experience. Whether the forms of culture—painting, literature, music, the dance, cinema—are explicitly religious, that is, displaying the symbols which we ordinarily connect with organized religion, is quite beside the point. Religion as ultimate concern is that which evokes art, which impels a man to express his grasp of the meaning of life in artistic form. It is as inappropriate to divorce religion and culture as to set up the false polarity between sacred and profane. Any cultural form whatever may express that ultimate concern which is the substance of culture.

Culture, then, is the form of religion. The idea of "culture" is amorphous, but we may define culture as a community's conception of itself and the various means it uses to express that self-image. Such a definition links culture closely with the notion of community and with the inevitable question as to what it means to be a human being among other human beings. Persons live together in a community according to a style determined by their view of the world. The ongoing community, in turn, communicates and perpetuates that world-view. A community coheres according to the way it answers the questions as to the nature and destiny of man. Those ultimate questions and the community's answers to them emerge as symbols which we usually refer to as "culture"—the many artistic

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 58.

forms which express the life style of a people. Cultural production, then, embodies in specific detail that essential culture which is the form of religion.

One should take care at this point not to think of culture *and* religion, though it is difficult to discuss the matter without some differentiation. What is involved here is the reality in which persons live, the world of meaning and the quest for meaning. On the level of ultimate concern, where man seeks to discover the ground and purpose of his life, religion and culture are contiguous movements in his existential exploration.

Tillich clarifies his dictum—religion is the substance of culture, culture the form of religion—by viewing culture under three categories: autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy. An autonomous view of culture evaluates cultural forms without reference to religion. Culture is a human creation and that is that. In such a view, one would not speak of either transcendence or depth. Though it is hardly possible to characterize one culture at a specific period in history as autonomous, it is apparent that the current positivistic world-view would be most at home with autonomy.

In the heteronomous culture, according to Tillich, the forms which culture takes are dictated by ecclesiastical and political groups. Partial, immediate interests usurp the place of religious (that is, ultimate) concern in shaping the community's life. One has not too far to look in history for idolatrous, totalitarian examples.

By theonomy Tillich wishes to suggest the actual appearance in a community of the unity of culture and religion. In the theonomous view of culture absolutely every cultural form is open to the transcendent. The whole of man's life, not excluding his unresolved doubts and press-

ing anxieties, reveals that concern for meaning essential to his being. From the perspective of theonomy, the fleeting elusiveness of DeKooning, the indecisive, endless talk of Beckett, the disconnected aimlessness of the new cinema—all may be transparent to the human search for truth. It would be beside the point to insist upon explicitly "religious" symbols or even upon a positive view of life as criteria for the appearance of religion in culture. The theonomous critic would, in the light of the new art, add to Tillich's dictum that *all* culture is the form of religion.

Given this rapprochement of religion and culture, the boundaries and the possibilities of the homiletical task are enlarged. The preacher who sets out to communicate with his contemporaries can assume that life is of a piece. He does not meet men and women "out there" as if they were strangers to religion. If he acknowledges that culture is the form of religion, the preacher will speak to people more and more in terms of culture. And, in doing that, it will become clear to him what distinctive role he plays as a *Christian* preacher. The first hurdle to clear is the theological arrogance which characterizes heteronomy. One gets over that obstacle by an appreciation for the religiousness of culture as such, that religiousness which resides in the very significance of human living and which gives innate integrity to the artistic vision. Once theological obscurantism is overcome, we may speak of the specifically Christian role of the preacher as he proceeds within a theonomous view of culture to do his homiletical work.

Tillich, in his word to preachers and teachers, urges the preacher to open himself up to culture. At the same time he issues a warning: "We can speak to people only if we participate in their concern, not by condescension, but by

sharing in it. We can point to the Christian answer only if, on the other hand, we are not identical with them."⁵ The admonition to participate is the first word: the church has been too prone to patronize or ignore culture. The preacher, in keeping with this all-too-common ecclesiastical attitude, may stand aloof from the world, or, coming to it, he may come as a preacher rather than as a concerned human being. Seeking little more than grist for his homiletical mill, he will be prone to manipulate what he finds of human experience, including art, rather than be grasped by it. On the other hand, Tillich warns that the Christian minister is not to be identical with the world. He calls on the preacher to guard his own integrity in the same measure that he learns respect for the artist and for every man as a human being.

It should be clear by now that the preacher speaks to men who are innately religious and whose religiousness expresses itself in unpredictable cultural forms. This suggests that when the preacher speaks in terms of ultimate concerns he will evoke a response.

The preacher, however, speaks not only to general religious feeling but out of the *Christian* tradition. The sermon moves from a specific, historically grounded tradition to the more general religious experience. The usual homiletical movement is from history, the Christian tradition, to ontology, the way it is with people. One has to understand how Christianity is related to religion in order to locate Christian preaching in relation to the cultural expression of religion.

Holy history meets our personal history. For the Christian, holy history is that galaxy of events which cohere

⁵ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 207.

around the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian religious experience occurs where the way it is with us (ontology) is touched by holy history (Christian tradition). On the other hand, holy history comes alive, that is becomes *living* tradition rather than a merely episodic past, only by meeting us in our present situation.

The artist, whose world is our present experience—vivid, earthy, compelling—gravitates to the ontological pole. He writes because he feels intensely what it is to be a human being *now*. His one ground of authority is that lived experience which impinges strongly upon him. The one thing he cannot gainsay is experience, life as it presents itself to him. His fulcrum is the moment, undeniable in its concreteness, inarticulable in its fleeting temporality. The artist, then, may be closely identified with ontology, with the concerns inherent in being a person now. The artist's world of work is the world in which he lives.

The preacher, by contrast, does his work in the world of the Bible. His material, for the most part, has come from holy history, from the inherited tradition. Generally, the one ground of authority which the Protestant preacher has held as unquestionable is the Bible, a source of authority articulate and quotable. The preacher, unlike the artist, does his work not in the realm of ontology but in close relation to holy history, which he may or may not relate to the actual world in which he lives. Too often the preacher reduces holy history to mere convention precisely because he does not meet that history as a person. The credibility gap between pulpit and pew is due in part to the suspicion that the preacher's world of work is not the world in which he lives.

It is clear, then, that in the meeting of the preacher and the artist two "worlds" collide. At stake is not only the possibility for a Christian engagement of literature but the viability of modern religious experience. Theological method becomes a matter of personal decision where one runs the risk of interpreting holy history by personal history and exposing personal history to holy history. In running that risk is the possibility of a tradition opened by and formative of the present. In the notion of a *living* tradition, ontology and history are inextricable.

The Homiletical Task as Hermeneutical

It is not surprising that the conclusion to Tillich's *Theology of Culture*, "Communicating the Christian Message," is in the form of a question to Christian ministers and teachers: "How shall the message be focused for the people of our time? In other words, we are concerned here with the question: *How* can the gospel be communicated?"⁶ That leading question, growing out of Tillich's life and work on the frontier where faith meets culture, sets up dialogue between the preacher and the artist.

To ask the question, and hopefully to answer it, in perspective, it is necessary to take an excursus into the very different theological world of Karl Barth, who perhaps more than any other man has stamped his point of view upon contemporary preaching. Barth, to paraphrase *Time*, bestrides the Protestant pulpit like a colossus. The average churchgoer may know little of Karl Barth's theology, but the sermon he hears on Sunday morning probably owes much of its form and content to the Swiss theologian. The sermon usually includes a text, even if only as a motto or

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

a tip-of-the-hat gesture toward the Bible. The persistence of preaching based upon biblical texts, however superficial the sermon's actual connection with Scripture, is owed in no small measure to Karl Barth. Anyone who opts for non-textual preaching will have to take account of Barth's objection. (Even in the divinity school my course titled "Preaching Values in Non-Biblical Literature" is dubbed "Non-Christian Preaching.") Once Barth is heard, and his intention understood in historical perspective, then his theology may be more friendly than inimical to the cause of the new preaching.

Barth is both the hero and the villain of contemporary preaching: the hero because of his rebellion against a glib liberalism; the villain because of the unforeseen long-range effects of that revolt. It is well known that Barth's entire theology began as marginal reflection upon the task of preaching. He took preaching seriously. It was, after all, talk about God. As a young pastor at Safenwil, Switzerland, he found himself unable to speak of God in the matter-of-fact, optimistic language of liberalism. In Barth's view, when the liberals came to the Bible, they regarded it as little more than another book of historical and literary interest. It seemed to him that the Bible as they interpreted it made no more demands upon them than the immanent God they preached. So the young preacher turned away from his mentors and back to the Bible and its more radical theology. Biblical preaching, Barth contended, could save the preacher from speaking of God as if he were merely speaking of man in a loud voice.

Barth's early work on *Romans* is significant as a commentary, an intense meeting with the text, and for its insistence on the "something more" which meets the Christian

exegete. Barth insisted, against his liberal teachers, that the Word of God had not been heard simply because one had mastered the literary details and historical setting of a text. Somehow, said Barth, the text must come alive now, that is, there must be an event in our experience today. Barth puts the point dogmatically: the authority of preaching is in the event of preaching and sacrament where the word of proclamation, guided by Holy Scripture, bears witness to Jesus Christ. Such a formula suggests an inner dynamism, an interplay or interphase whose movement issues in a moving word. The authority of Scripture is in its actually ringing bells which set up sympathetic vibrations in those who hear preaching and move through the drama of the liturgy. The Bible, by Barth's own formula, could be called the residue and the catalyst of a happening, written by men moved by an experience and moving men today within that same experience. The authority of Scripture is, in short, existential. Barth has spent volumes in showing that to be the case, and in his tireless advocacy of the *eventfulness* of the Word of God he is heroic.

But Barth inadvertently plays the villain. His determination to return to the Bible, and to ground talk about God elsewhere than in human subjectivity, landed him in preoccupation with texts as texts. Barth did not carry over to the actual work of homiletics the seminal idea which grew out of his theological reflection upon his work as a preacher: the Word of God *happens* to men. In reaction against what he regarded as the presumption of an anthropocentric liberalism, Karl Barth the preacher withdrew into the world of the Bible. His preoccupation with texts as such has tended to vitiate his contribution to the idea of word-event. His insistence upon textual preaching, for

example, has encouraged the wooden biblicism characteristic of many American pulpits. It is the greatest irony that the preacher who thinks that he has done his duty when he exegetes and expounds a text with little regard to his congregation's worldly life, owes that notion, at least in part, to Karl Barth.

Barth stopped short of the full hermeneutical implications of his earliest work. He started the church and her preachers moving toward the word-event, in which was inherent authority, only to head off that forward movement by parrying the key question as to the nature of religious experience. From a historical perspective we can see that Barth was so intent upon building a dialectical theology which separated God radically from man that he was unable to appreciate the positive contribution of Schleiermacher. Barth denied Schleiermacher's major premise, that Christian faith is grounded in man's general experience of God. Had Barth been more open to Schleiermacher, as was Tillich, he would not have equated homiletics with textual exegesis and narrow exposition. If Barth had entertained more seriously Schleiermacher's idea that all men have a sense of God, then he would have expected the Word of God not exclusively in connection with texts but wherever men live with feeling.

Nevertheless, Barth has insisted that the Word is eventful, not so much merely heard as happening. Barth's failure to proceed to develop his homiletical method accordingly does not prevent our holding as cardinal his maxim: the Word of God is an event.

Barth's word-event and Tillich's theology of culture open the way toward understanding the homiletical task as hermeneutical. Tillich puts the homiletical question:

How can the gospel be communicated? We are asking: How do we make the message heard and seen, and then either rejected or accepted? The question *cannot* be: How do we communicate the gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method.⁷

The intention of preaching is to bring men to a meeting, into an encounter with God. In the event of preaching men face the ultimate questions, and facing them are, as H. H. Farmer would say, brought to ultimate demand and final succour. Bringing men to the meeting is the specific task of preaching. That we are failing at the task is apparent in that where preaching is not altogether ignored it too often elicits yes from those who should say no and no from those who should say yes.

The question which presses upon us is: How do we preach so that men meet God? It is as simple as that. Do we rely upon the Bible only, trusting it to be the Word of God which needs only to be rehearsed? Or do we turn to our own subjectivity and the innovation of which we are capable? Or is there, as has already been suggested, some middle ground?

Professor Frederick Herzog, student of Barth and Schleiermacher, holds those two theologians together in such a way as to provide a theological method particularly helpful to the development of a hermeneutic of preaching. The historico-ontological method recognizes on the one hand the biblical witness to a particular history. Any Christian hermeneutic must give a large place to Jesus of Nazareth and to the biblical witness which revolves around him. But it is quite clear in Holy Scripture itself that ontology, the way it is with people, conditioned the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

writing of the Gospels and Epistles.⁸ Something happened in the life of Jesus of Nazareth which moved men in their "hearts." An hour bell set the bells in men to ringing, beginning a whole series of sympathetic vibrations among the followers of Jesus. The Bible is their conscientious but nevertheless human attempt to bring that experience to verbal expression. In that enterprise they used all the cultural forms at their disposal, calling on the resources of Greek philosophy as well as Roman law, just as their teacher had not hesitated to range through the world of the commonplace in his preaching in parables. That those Christian witnesses to their experience have succeeded is apparent in the Bible's persistence and in the part it plays in making the bells ring again. But that we have misunderstood what they were doing is apparent when we equate the Bible with the Word of God and so cut off the Bible's texts from that very human experience which moved their writers.

No one understands the Bible in a vacuum. The preacher cannot elect to interpret the Bible either from an ontological or a historical point of view. To understand is to make the two-way movement from the written word to one's own experience and from one's experience back to the literature. One does not enter the world of the Bible except as a presently concerned human being. That is the obvious meaning of Barth's insistence upon the "something more" in biblical interpretation.

By way of a summary answer to the question "How is Christianity (and therefore the Bible and biblical preach-

⁸ Frederick Herzog, *Understanding God* (New York: Scribner's, 1966).

ing) related to general religious experience?" we may reiterate the supposition that all human experience is potentially religious. The smaller bells are there. They were there in the men who wrote the Bible, ready to be rung by the note sounded in Jesus. That to which the Bible spoke, and to which it speaks, resides in the depths of man's life. The Bible can speak because it speaks of Jesus of Nazareth *and* because men are ready to hear about what happened in him. What happened in his history moved men to make history in such a way as to move us in our history.

It is this hermeneutical presupposition which Barth failed to accept. He was forced by a lack of hermeneutical definition to a miraculous notion of the Word of God. For example, Barth considers the Isenheim altarpiece a highly religious painting. Grünewald's painting of the horribly emaciated crucified Jesus hangs in the chapel of what was in medieval times a refuge for incurables. Barth stops short of hermeneutical definition when he says that it is the sheer offense of the painting which is its power. The Word of God, then, becomes a bolt out of the blue, creating a hearing by its sheer otherness, its infinite qualitative difference from man's world. Here is *God* suffering. Tillich, on the other hand, views Picasso's *Guernica* as deeply religious, this picture of suffering in a small Spanish village ravaged by war. The theologian who proceeds according to the historico-ontological method asks what it is in Grünewald's agonized, leprous Crucified which speaks to the torn men in Picasso's work. He sees the religious in both works and attempts to understand its expression in the grotesque painting of one man suffering on a cross. Whereas Barth stops at saying that here is *God* suffering, Tillich might wish to emphasize that it is *God suffering*.

The historico-ontological method, then, enables us to hold together religion in the limited sense—holy history and the tradition stemming from it—and religion in the broad sense, the whole range of man's concerned experience. Any serious preacher who does not know it already will eventually discover that he of all people must *live* that method, or, better put, that he holds together in his person holy history and ontological concern. Great preaching appears where a man lives by faith in the world. The homiletical task is hermeneutical: the preacher is intent upon coming to and sharing understanding. Hermeneutics is finally a way of being in the world. That way of being in the world is homiletical: the specific place where the Christian tradition meets present experience is the sermon. As I have suggested in the preface, it was the homiletical task which led me to think that contemporary literature might provide a place of meeting where faith sees itself more clearly and is, accordingly, able to make itself more visible.

Theology and Literature

American theological schools exhibit a lively interest in a newcomer to the curriculum, "Theology and Literature." The persons most attracted to this new discipline are likely to be of two categories: the uneasy theologian who is trying to understand the tradition in which he works, or the preacher whose vocation calls him to make the tradition available to the outsider. The searching theologian and the conscientious preacher are, as a matter of fact, alike in their ways of being in the world. Neither is content with his present grasp of the faith. Both are aware of being, either actually or by identification with persons who are, "outside" the faith.

Preachers and theologians know the church's traditional way of speaking about God, but both are looking for new language and lively images adequate to hand over the tradition to men today. This is not to say that the preacher-theologian assumes that he knows the tradition fully and then sets out to find words and parables as mere vehicles for passing on what is already known. Theologians are coming to see that the marketplace, to which the preacher speaks and in which all men live, is as good a place as the cloister for learning the meaning of the tradition. For example, the serious student of theology and literature hopes that at the place of meeting with art, faith will become more visible to him and subsequently more available to his readers and auditors. In short, when the preacher-theologian meets the artist he hopes both to receive and to give. That hope is grounded in the strong and particular affinity between the literary artist and the theologian, however dimly that affinity is seen.

Literature particularly among the arts is valuable to the preacher as a person whose vocation is inseparable from his person. It is hardly possible for the preacher to speak of his personal as over against his professional interest in literature. If he does so too easily, he reveals that he has not appreciated the theological value of literature as authentic religious vision. Just because the artist meets us in our personal as well as our professional concerns, it is difficult for us to describe the significance which we find in literature.

The artists themselves have attempted to describe the unique value of literature. Oscar Wilde, for example, thought that literature, of all the forms of art, was most competent to deal with the complexity of modern life:

Modern life is complex and relative; those are its two distinguishing notes: to render the first we require atmosphere with its subtlety of nuances, of suggestion, of strange perspectives; as for the second, we require background. That is why sculpture has ceased to be a representative art and why literature is and has been and always will remain the supreme representative art.⁹

We feel, in reading the literature of our time, that we are comprehended in the complexity of our experience, that the artist has seen something of the whole. What Gerhard Ebeling has said of theology, that it helps us to see a wider horizon, we experience in literature. Though the artist moves, as our life often seems to go, from one ordinary thing to another, transcendent to the merely episodic is his overarching vision of meaning, or perhaps, if no meaning appears, his conviction that there *ought* to be meaning. The artist, by setting episode and vignette against background and within complexity relieves human life of "mereness," of flat immediacy, setting human experience always within a frame of meaning, whether that meaning appears by positive explication or negative implication. In other words, literature is valuable because it persists in affirming our humanity even when immediate circumscribed experience would deny us meaning. The artist's vision breaks in upon mereness in a way analogous to the Sunday sermon's intrusion upon the would-be humdrum dailiness of our life.

The writer may be quite explicit about life's meaning, as in the case of such openly Christian writers as T. S. Eliot or Alan Paton, or he may imply the religious dimension by showing the agonizing absence of meaning, as in the plays of Samuel Beckett or the fiction of Albert Camus.

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Poems and Essays*, ed. G. F. Maine (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1956), p. 183.

Along the continuum between these two extremes one could place most of the writers of this century.

Given such a continuum between the obviously Christian writers and those authors who reveal their concern as negative searching, the homiletical value of literature varies from work to work. But all serious literature is theologically valuable, and it is only when that is understood that any literature is homiletically available.

Surely it is clear by now that preaching values in non-biblical literature are more than illustrative. Though we have all used literature for homiletical illustration, we are aware that to stop there is to subvert art and to miss the real value of literature for the pulpit. Illustrations, to be sure, are to be had from our reading, but even illustration depends upon genuine encounter with the work of art as a whole and an appreciation for the relative autonomy of art. If the preacher views literature as merely another mouthpiece by which to express his ideas, then he will use literature to his own inflexible purposes. Such assimilationist procedure is not consonant with Tillich's protestant principle, which calls for that openness to experience out of which new understanding of oneself and one's tradition comes.

If we approach literature with the specific intention of finding sermon fodder, we are not likely to gain what the artist as artist has to give. Like all readers, we miss the story unless we lose ourselves in it. As preachers we stand in particular danger of remaining manipulators with little chance of being moved, forever prone to order life as we order our sermons, in outline form. So the first practical word of advice is: give yourself personally to literature. Until it moves you it will certainly move no one through

your preaching. Literature, if allowed to do so, can kindle the imagination as one sees nature with the New England poets, America with Steinbeck, the South with Faulkner; or as he feels the lostness of Kafka, the searching passion of Camus; the world reduced to the flat mereness of Hemingway or Updike; or as he ponders Bellow's vision of grace. In short, the artist will teach us to see if we are not looking too intently for what we want to see. It is possible to proceed as if we had already seen, that is, heteronomously, and so never to see. That is the preacher's particular peril as he meets literature. What will save him from the dogmatism which seems to go hand in hand with his profession is the willingness to come to literature as a searching man who knows the meaning of lostness.

To summarize, the preacher-theologian can appropriate literature to his professional task only if he appreciates the work of art personally. Once that caveat is in mind, then we may come to literature *as* theologians and preachers. Close on the heels of all that has gone before, let it be emphasized that we will not be successful in our homiletical encounter with literature unless we bring theology as a light to read by. The theologian has something special to bring to literature. Where theology as theology meets literature as literature there is the possibility of the most fruitful dialogue.

I first taught a course in "Preaching Values in Nonbiblical Literature" in 1967. The students in that class were inclined to use novels, poetry, and drama as illustrative of what they already knew as theologians. I had to insist constantly that the class look at the literature as literature, that they not impose theological categories so quickly and that they unearth "hidden" Christian doctrines with less glee.

That class brought theology to literature, but in an unfortunate way. They imposed theological abstractions upon the work of art before they had allowed the literature to speak to them as persons.

By contrast, students in the same course two years later took the opposite approach. Reflecting, it would appear, the new mood of seminary students everywhere, these young men and women seemed embarrassed to use theological language at all. The sermons they wrote on Faulkner, Salinger, Bellow, and Baldwin betrayed little direct connection with Christian theology. This nontheological, almost antitheological, approach was no doubt due in part to my early lectures which, in reaction to the 1967 experience, had urged the appreciation of art as art. Beyond that, however, the reluctance to speak theologically reflected a certain disillusion not only with theological language as such but with systematic theology generally. What was more heartening to see, however, was the fact that as the course moved along the very encounter with literature revealed the relevance of theology. It was simply easier to get hold of *Giovanni's Room*, after the initial reading, with the help of the Christian doctrines of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. And it became apparent that in the reading of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Albee, Christian theology was indeed a light to read by.

The preacher upon opening a book ought to read it first for itself and for himself. At the same time, he ought not to be embarrassed to be a theologian. On one level, most of our literature is steeped in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, however obscured or perverted. At another level, theology and literature have a close and particular affinity. De Rougemont has defined art as a "calculated trap for

meditation" which leads the individual both to see clearly what he already knows and to a meeting with what he does not know.¹⁰ If one is prematurely analytical or reflective, if he rushes to impose theological categories, he may trip the trap and escape being caught. On the other hand, the trap is for meditation and is set by the artist's belief about what is finally important, however obscure in the work that belief may be. The meditation to which the belief-oriented work of art would lead us invites us to bring theology to literature. If we go at literature in freedom for the new thing and with that openness which faith should afford, the meditation to which we are led may be all the more profound for our being theologians. It is in the uninhibited encounter with literature that a sermon may be conceived and in theological reflection that it is formed. The homiletical task, having the intention of meeting people at a particular time and place, leads us to be open to culture while being attentive to theology. It is just that frame of mind which is needed in the interpretation of literature. In short, the "bifocality" of preaching¹¹ predisposes the preacher to an interest in the dialogue between theology and contemporary literature.

¹⁰ Denis de Rougement, "Religion and the Mission of the Artist," in *The New Orpheus*, ed. Nathan Scott, Jr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), pp. 59-73.

¹¹ Cf. James T. Cleland, *Preaching to Be Understood* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), chap. 2.

Literary Art and the Content of the Sermon

THE SERMON IS WHERE the action is. The act of preaching is a contemporary happening in which faith becomes visible. Despite our disappointment with the sermons we actually hear, and our own general word-weariness, we cannot but think that speech is as essential as history to Christianity. Persistent in the Hebrew-Christian tradition is the close juxtaposition of word and action; one has only to hear the prophets' preaching while watching their dramatic actions to grasp the Hebrew's sense of word-event. In the New Testament, in the same way, words and actions combine; speech is both prior to and interpretive of action. Standing in such a tradition, it is easy for us to grant that human experience is largely linguistic. If we do grant that, and if we take seriously the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, then the words of faith directed to men at their moment in history are *the* words. It is the word-event, the place where word gives meaning to action and speech

participates in history, which is the continuing nexus of Christian faith.¹²

But is not this wishful thinking? Our experience of the weekly sermon suggests that preaching is rather out of touch with history, both holy history and our present life in the world. Few parishioners would describe the sermon as eventful. Candor would probably locate the sermon in the most becalmed latitudes of the Sunday morning doldrums. In fact, the sermon frequently seems an obstacle to the movement of the liturgy, as prosey and pedestrian as it is aloof from the human situation. The tendency of preaching to veer toward the nonhistorical appears in the sharp separation in the Protestant service between the sermon and congregational worship. The preacher seems as reluctant to participate in the liturgy, the people's action, as in history.

It is only when preaching is thoroughly historical that it is the place of God's action. "Bifocality" is essential, not merely functional, to preaching. That is to say, only as the preacher lives in the world can he do the work of a theologian and a preacher. Participation in history-in-the-making is the key to holy history; worldliness is the hermeneutical entree to the inherited tradition. The preacher, as any man, comes to understand theology when he takes himself and his world seriously. As Tillich wrote: "The sources of systematic theology can be sources only for one who participates in them, that is, through experience. Experience is the medium through which the sources 'speak' to us, through which we can receive them."¹³ Experience is the

¹² Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:40.

most sensitive theological tutor, introducing us anew to a tradition with which we may have long been acquainted but have never known. The preacher, of all persons, is called to live in the flux of history. It is just that historical mode of life which leads him into the world of meaning behind the biblical, doctrinal, and liturgical forms of the Christian tradition.

The past shapes the present. That is axiomatic for the Christian tradition; we stand in the faith once delivered to the saints. On the other hand, while we make the present of the past, it is the present which determines in large measure *what* we will make of the past. The "new psychiatry" provides an analogy. Such physicians as Ernest Becker take issue with the Freudian notion that the present is dominated by the past, that the experiences of early childhood are finally determinative. On the contrary, says Becker, though foregoing experience does shape our development, the quality of our present life determines what we do with the past, whether we use it creatively or are destroyed by its strictures. What is important is freedom in the present, a variety of options for action, and the personal courage to exercise those options. What a man becomes, according to the new psychiatry, depends primarily not upon what he has been but upon the degree to which his past is shaped by what and where he is today.¹⁴

By this analogy, the preacher's "past" is the tradition in which he has been baptized and in which he has probably been reared. His past is the churchly milieu of theological language and esoteric liturgy. This man with such a past is called upon to speak to men in history marked by ac-

¹⁴ Cf. Ernest Becker, *The Revolution in Psychiatry* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

celerating change. The concrete model of this meeting of faith and culture is the sermon, a linguistic phenomenon oriented to a specific contemporary setting *and* to an equally specific and venerable tradition. The preacher's vocation is to shuttle between past and present, between traditional faith and contemporary culture.

Out of the Cloister

Contemporary literature facilitates homiletical shuttling between faith and culture by liberating the preacher from the Protestant cloister. The literary artist helps the preacher to move away from that churchly provincialism which makes theology opaque and preaching otherworldly. Literature affords an entree to the way it is with people today. The preacher, who is likely to grow up in a protected home, go to a church school, and learn his theology in a seminary, needs the artist's view of things. Rilke wrote of poetry, but he could have said the same of preaching:

To write a single line one must have seen many cities, men, and things. . . . One must have had the memory of the groans of childbirth, and of the pale and sleeping forms of those who have given birth, their bodies disburdened. One must have been with the dying, have watched by the dead with the window open to the sound of the world's stir outside.¹⁵

The artist opens a window on the world, leading the preacher into new experience and suggesting to him wider possibilities for being human. The artist does not merely bring the world to the preacher to be used as illustration. Rather, he makes the preacher more worldly wise, more aware of unique personhood, and less inclined to that tacit denial of the Incarnation which is the constant temptation of monasticism and pietism. The minister who reads novels

¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Les Cahiers de Malte Laurids Brigge* (Paris: Editions Emile-Paul Frères, 1926), pp. 25-26.

and sees plays will be at once a more astute theologian and a more worldly preacher.

Protestantism is, after all, more true to itself when it lives outside stained glass, in the world. The way of an assured heteronomy can never be the way of Protestantism. Whenever the church retreats from the world it begins to misunderstand its own theology. It becomes ingrown and self-concerned, a posture inimical to self-understanding. As Nathan Scott has said, "the genius of Protestantism is most truly expressed when, in its dealings with what is called 'secular culture,' it so takes this body of witness up into itself that the distinction between the sacred and the secular ceases to exist."¹⁶ The preacher whose vision is clarified by the artist's picture of the world may find that in himself the distinction between the sacred and the secular recedes. It is likely that he will display not only a new theological acumen, but that concern for present human experience which is theology's interpreter and the Bible's exegete.

The Artist as Secular

Literature also rescues the preacher from cultural absolutism, a common pitfall within the Protestant cloister. The minister born and bred to the parsonage is likely to identify Christianity with what goes on in a particular town or region, to equate faith and a particular culture. (The incidence of agnosticism among children of the clergy may be due in part to their inability to conceive of the faith apart from what they have learned in the manse.) The sermons produced by such an equation are quite likely to

¹⁶ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 45.

be little more than moralistic affirmations of culture. Indeed, preaching isolated from a broad range of vital experience may fix itself upon certain cultural forms to the point of deifying patriotism or making selected personal practices essential to Christian faith. The history of the church in America provides many examples of this identification of Christ and culture: "manifest destiny"; the close connection between American Christianity and a negative moral code; the alliance between small-town Protestantism and crusades against Darwinian science and the drinking of alcoholic beverages.

The artist, usually maverick, secular, and "catholic," resists cultural absolutism. He is at odds with every heteronomous view of the world, whether it appears in social, political, or ecclesiastical garb. That is not to say that the artist is incapable of a heteronomous world-view. His view of things may be partial, his works biased. For example, when Mark Twain takes on small-town Protestantism he is by no means fully objective or unbiased. He, like the people of provincial Hannibal, can be nearsighted. However, once we have been warned away from too high an estimate of the contemporary writer, we can appreciate his normative secularity and catholicity.

To be truly secular is to renounce the narrow world-view of heteronomy, to see that the true and the good elude every cultural form. The authentically secular man embodies the Protestant principle; he knows that none of his works, nor the works of his society, can be equated with the work of God. He is constantly self-critical and, consequently, open to the possibility of meeting God at any time and place. That is to say, authentic secularity is open to theonomy precisely because it renounces heteronomy.

Secularity by no means presupposes autonomy. It is, on the contrary, an oppressive heteronomy which drives the secular man to an autonomous world-view. It is just possible, for example, that such a man as Stephen Crane was driven from the church, to whose message his works reveal him so obviously sensitive, precisely because he was a son of the parsonage. Wherever men, however well-meaning, collaborate to impose their partial views and sanctified provincialism as absolute, the truly secular man is often alienated from organized religion, if not from the idea of transcendence itself. In plain words, many deeply religious persons are unable to identify God with the church at Fourth and Main Street—or with patriotism and conventional morality—and thus cease to speak of God at all precisely because their peers speak of him so confidently in those connections.

Enter the artist. At his best genuinely secular, he is usually the social critic, leading his heroes and heroines out of the flat Midwest, Puritan New England, the decaying South, the nouveau West, the American cocktail party. He knows (and that is the reason for his being an artist) that human being, to say nothing of God, can be identified with no province. The norms for man's life and the rubrics for his praise of God outreach the bounds of any culture. It is in this sense that the artist is, in John Bennett's phrase, "normatively secular":

The normative secular implies freedom from tribalisms, from obsessive ideologies, from the prejudices that are so familiar in our own society, from secularism as a system. It means a healthy pluralism that knows neither old nor new forms of spiritual bondage.¹⁷

¹⁷ John Bennett, "The Church and the Secular," *Christianity and Crisis* 26 (December 26, 1966): 295.

The normatively secular artist has a certain freedom, even from institutional religion. He is in a favored position for seeing that Christianity is not necessarily what goes on in a New England village with a church on the green, in a Midwestern town well supplied with preachers, or in a Bible-toting Southern county. An example of this helpful detachment is in Lawrence and Lee's play, *Inherit the Wind*.¹⁸ The biology teacher is on trial for teaching evolution in a public school; he is also engaged to the daughter of the local minister, who brands all evolutionists as anti-Christian. It is simply assumed, because the schoolteacher cannot go along with the mindless consensus, that he has given up the faith. Christianity, however, the play concludes, is not necessarily what goes on in Bible-quoting Hillsboro.

It is such normative secularity, clear-eyed detachment from culture, which enables the artist to see the situation whole and to meet it with some of the resources of the prophet. By reason of that secularity, the artist is the valuable ally of the preacher who is less mobile in his relation to "Christian" culture. The literary artist can minister to the preacher by affording him distance from the situation with which he must identify and to which, on the other hand, he must speak. The writer, in his detached concern, clearly has prophetic possibilities. Worldly in the sense of normative secularity, the artist is likely to be less *of* the world than the institutional church and its spokesmen.

The church, just because it is a venerable institution, is strongly inclined to culture-affirmation. In H. Richard Niebuhr's categories, the church is much more likely to be *of* the world than either against it or transforming of it.

¹⁸ *Inherit the Wind* (New York: Random House, 1955).

The world is very much with the church; the church lays waste its treasure in getting social approval and spending its energies on finding and joining the social consensus. The artist, on the other hand, often a dissenter from cultural values, is likely to stand outside the establishment in any given community. If not identified with Bohemia, he is usually sympathetic toward those groups which by their very existence at the margins of society make for a critique of culture. The preacher, described by one American novelist as "the scrupulous social puppet," may find in the artist that cultural detachment and enlargement of mind which will inject a prophetic critique of culture into his preaching. It is certain that the likelihood of prophetic preaching increases in proportion to the preacher's learning to sit loose to social consensus while being as concerned as the artist for the quality of human life.

The artist is prophetic because he is catholic. Clearly the concerns of the contemporary writer are more authentically human and more deeply religious than the economic and organizational goals of American society generally, and of the churches in particular. The artist is living nearer to where people live, nearer to the level of feeling and searching and fearing. It is in his sharing of universal human concerns that the artist is catholic. Arthur Machen considers catholicity the mark of true literature:

You ask me for a new test—or rather a new expression of the one test that separates literature from the mass of stuff which is not literature. Literature is the expression, through the esthetic medium of words, of the dogma of the Catholic Church, and that which is any way out of harmony with these dogmas is not literature.

Yes; it is really so, but not exactly in the sense which you suppose. No literal compliance with Christianity is needed;

no, nor even an acquaintance with the doctrines of Christianity. . . . The conscious opinions of a writer are simply not worth twopence in the court of literature. . . . Think of it and you will see, that from the literary standpoint, Catholic dogma is merely the witness, under a special symbolism, of the enduring facts of human nature and the universe; it is merely the voice which tells us distinctly that man is *not* the creature of the drawing room and the Stock Exchange, but a lonely awful soul confronted by the Source of all souls, and you will realize that to make literature it is necessary to be, at all events subconsciously, Catholic.¹⁹

This is, of course, no effort to baptize literature, no more than it is to be naive about the artist's limitations. But it is to say that it is the artist's very humanity, the fact that his medium is human experience, which makes him catholic. To see the artist as catholic is to recognize the religious nature of literature as expressing ultimate human concerns. The preacher who enters the world of literature may be enabled to speak to men and women in danger of losing their humanity in mundane and partial concerns. The sermon imbued of the catholic vision will move toward criticism of culture and, accordingly, toward new health for individuals.

The man who is on the way, vitally alive in the present and concerned for the future, is the man open to God. John Bennett thinks that the normative secular is particularly open to the Christian tradition: "The secular is interpreted as open in a special way to the Biblical revelation (which, by definition, is not religious). In other words, faith in Christ has a privileged position in the truly secular order that has won freedom from religion.'"²⁰ Bennett

¹⁹ Quoted in H. C. Gardiner, *American Classics Reconsidered* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 13.

²⁰ Bennett, "The Church and the Secular," p. 295.

uses "religion" here to mean institutional or tribal religion. Wherever men detach themselves spiritually from overweening ideologies and idolatrous loyalties, they are more likely to see a burning bush, to follow a pillar of fire, to worship in a tent in the wilderness or meet God in the desert. So long, however, as men live by cliché, equating truth with convention, they can hardly follow the God who moves in history, transcending the world and all cultures in his righteousness and love. The prophet is likely to come from Tekoa, a place out of the way, just as a holy people is likely to be born on a journey. We are beginning to see that the artist, just because he refuses to operate by cliché, is open to the God of history. The minister who comes to share his vision, to participate more fully in the human situation, may find himself a more prophetic preacher.

The Artist as Religious

The preacher, then, who keeps company with the artist will be more worldly than ecclesiastical, more universal than provincial. What is more, his sermons will move nearer to poetry than to the prose of the marketplace, lecture hall, and laboratory. The artist resists positivism as strongly as he opposes cultural and churchly absolutism. Oriented to the personal and the individual, he is the foe of every form of heteronomy, whether it be scientific, academic, or religious. The strongest bond between the artist and the man of faith is their common opposition to the positivistic reduction of human experience.

The church has, of course, long been aware of its bond with the artist. The cathedrals of Europe and the music of Bach are cases in point. The church and the artist speak of realities which only they can express. And their way of

speaking flies in the face of an age that would exhaust reality by empirical definition.

There is in art the dimension of transcendence, or to be more contemporary, depth. Daniel Marsh, writing about creative preaching, says: "The function of art is always the same, in whatever realm it operates: to teach us to see; to teach us what to see; to teach us to see more than we see."²¹ Art, then, by its very intention, denies that reality is exhausted by empirical description. There is in human experience the dimension of depth; indeed, what is real appears where poetic vision pierces the surface, the "mereness" of life.

Positivism would stay on the surface, reducing reality to what we see and allowing no scope for seeing more than we see. Nathan Scott describes the effect of logical positivism upon our generation as "the deep illness of our age":

That illness may be defined in terms of the belief, pervasive throughout our period, that the whole of experience may be subsumed under the categories of empirical science—a belief which is accompanied by a consequent impatience with those elements of our experience which resist such disposal.²²

This philosophy, cutting off actual human experience from a narrowly defined reserve of "reality," is indeed pervasive throughout our period. The so-called scientific approach to life reduces reality to the world of the test tube, the computer, the sentence susceptible to diagraming. We may be sure that the present malaise, expressed most sharply in the student revolution, is the end result of a naturalistic theory of knowledge, reality, and culture. Counting as

²¹ Daniel L. Marsh, in *Creative Preaching*, ed. G. Bromley Oxnam (New York: Abingdon Press, 1930), p. 156.

²² Scott, *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier*, p. 1.

genuine and relevant only such knowledge as serves technology—the manipulation and control of the world—Western man has more and more come to a positivistic, naturalistic view of the world. That philosophy has led him not only to ecological crisis but to spiritual crisis as well.²³

The positivist distinguishes two main uses of language. One may speak scientifically or referentially; that is to speak sensibly. Or one may speak emotively or homiletically; to speak in this manner is to spout nonsense. Perhaps, it is conceded, man does have needs which are ministered to by art and religion, but the myths which he fashions to satisfy these requirements of his nature have significance only in the private world of individual subjectivity.²⁴ The positivist would banish poetry from the Just City, and not poetry alone but theology as well.

Not all positivists are outside the church, not by any means. The author preached on Pentecost Sunday in the chapel of a Southern university. The sermon was admittedly much nearer poetry than the laboratory or the lecture room. The undergraduates were appreciative. But a letter came a few days later which revealed not so much the disagreement of the writer with the sermon as the fact that he had been unable to enter the preacher's world of discourse. The letter began, tellingly:

Lest you mistake me for some far out extremist or fanatic, please be assured that I am a scientist, a graduate of ——— College and ——— University with, respectively, bachelor [*sic*] and a master's degree in chemistry. . . . It is as a scientist that I would like to comment on your chapel address, "Huckleberry Finn, the Holy Spirit, and the New Morality."

²³ Cf. E. M. Adams, "Some Thoughts on the Revolution in Academic," *Chapel Hill Weekly*, December 25, 1968.

²⁴ Cf. Scott, *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier*, p. 3.

The scientific method is to objectively test each hypothesis by observed realities. Your speech [note] was dishonest factually, morally and intellectually from a scientific viewpoint.²⁵

The writer is a convinced fundamentalist, but that is more instructive than surprising. Fundamentalism is, in the last analysis, the ecclesiastical version of positivism, the reduction of religious experience to biblicism and a "plan of salvation." In its extreme forms, fundamentalism may reduce Christianity to a series of religious acts and personal abstentions which obligate God to keep his "written promises." It is not unfair to describe as positivistic that religious style which relies upon "chapter and verse," a lined-out moral code, and stereotyped religious experience. It is not at all unpredictable that a scientist prone to fundamentalism should reject a sermon impressionistically based on Mark Twain's novel and advocating moral behavior as unpredictable, and as liberating as the rushing winds of Pentecost.

Positivism—the improper transference of the empiricism indispensable to scientific method to the realms of the humanities, the arts, and religion—is proving inadequate to man's expanding sensibility. The scientist, as much aware of that inadequacy as any other sensitive man, is by no means necessarily a positivist. In fact, he usually is not. The sensitive scientist, to whose work humility is essential, does not absolutize and universalize his method. He leaves room for wonder and for values which lie beyond the physical fact.

Positivistic procedure, in whatever guise, simply cannot express the human situation. There are dimensions to hu-

²⁵ Unpublished signed letter, May, 1966.

man experience that lie beyond the reach of scientific language. Life as we live it outreaches the one-for-one equation of the laboratory. Even sociologists and anthropologists, for example, are discovering that they cannot describe communities or exhaust the components of culture on IBM cards. Scientific language falls short of describing human community just as technology has failed to create a human environment.

The historical crisis of our time in which the moral neutrality of science has been so terrifyingly revealed has, of course, begun to force our generation to wonder whether, after all, there are not other approaches to truth besides those provided by the observational and experimental techniques of science.²⁶

We cannot but think that the ecological crisis is a crisis of the spirit. What is happening to the land and to the cities, happens first in the channels of communication by which a philosophy of life is formed, transmitted, and celebrated. When the language of "data" is taken to be the only real language, then the failure of spirit, of "soul," begins to express itself in the landscape. Such times are upon us, driving us to find new words which can give meaning to the physical fact. Increasingly, modern men are turning to the poetic for expressive and creative symbols. It is just there, where men experience depth and look for appropriate symbols, that religion lives.²⁷

The poetic is as indispensable to the human spirit as religion. The poet is primarily a man of vision and passion, a man given to an obsession. It is certainly not the case that he is a thinker, that is, not *primarily* a thinker: "For

²⁶ Scott, *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier*, p. 4.

²⁷ Cf. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 131.

what the writer has is not a *system* of belief but rather an *imagination* of what is radically significant."²⁸ This passion rises from the poet's commitment, however unformed, to what concerns him as a man. It is this commitment, or belief, which makes the poem available to men as men and, at the same time, links the poetic vision with religion:

In the creative process, the aesthetic intentions of the artist are not segregated from all that most vitally concerns him as a human being but are, on the contrary, formed by these concerns and thus empowered to orient the work toward common human experience.²⁹

That is to say, "belief" is inextricable from involvement in the human situation. The poet is at odds with positivism for the same reason that he is in league with religion: he takes seriously and attempts to express in a way peculiar to the experience, the depths of man's life in the world. This alliance between poetry and religion against positivism has, like the artist's resistance to cultural absolutism and ecclesiastical provincialism, the most profound implications for the content of preaching.

The Worldliness of Preaching

Since Dietrich Bonhoeffer the church has tried with renewed passion to find its life *in* the world. Having formerly turned away from "worldliness," Christians have learned from the young German theologian that their vocation today is not to be "religious" but to live a worldly life. The Christian lives, because he partakes of the Incarnation, "a life of the deepest engagement with the full human and cultural reality of the particular moment to which history

²⁸ Scott, *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier*, p. 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

commits him—and a life grounded in the confidence that the Holy and the Sacred are to be encountered in the true depth of that historical reality.”³⁰ Bonhoeffer came to the notion of worldly Christianity by way of an intense study of the Bible and an equally fervent involvement in the social and political maelstrom which was Germany in the time of his young manhood. He heard the Word of God in Scripture and proclamation, but also in his encounter with the world and with his own humanity. Because his idea of “worldliness” was formed in a biblical as well as a social and personal matrix, it is precisely the word by which to characterize preaching. Authentic preaching is worldly because it is grounded in biblical faith; it is truly biblical only when it is worldly.

The worldly sermon reveals a man who lives where people live. His work is of a piece with his life, so to speak, on Main Street. The content of the worldly sermon is the stuff of everyday, the scenario recognizable by the congregation as “our town.” The preacher, even as he does the work of classical homiletics—exegesis, exposition, application—does that work in the linguistic “world” of contemporary life. As has been shown, he cannot read the Bible *or* do the work of theology apart from his own experience. Coordinately, he can hardly appropriate the Bible and theology to himself and his contemporaries if he is not fully participant in their world. It follows, then, that the minister is pursuing his vocation when he reads novels and attends plays, sees movies, and takes time for poetry. He may come to know some members of his congregation only by

³⁰ Nathan Scott, Jr., “Theology and the Literary Imagination,” in *Adversity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 11.

moving in the world of literature and drama as attentively as he makes his parish rounds.

The congregations to which we preach live at once in the world of tradition and the compelling present. Too often the tradition has become staid convention and, even more lamentably, conventional Christianity has become compensation for, or escape from, the present. The churches are too well populated with persons who have been able to divorce religion from life by denying life as it is. Convention is frequently a substitute for vitality.

The sermon which moves in an antique world, phrased in theological jargon, is quite acceptable to many churchgoers. The worldly sermon which breaks out of stained glass is often an offense. And that is so because such a sermon threatens to expose pious conventionalism for what it is. A sermon which moves from the tradition to the world of sex and sweat, work and play, is unsettling to the man who wishes to avoid serious thought about himself. Such a sermon is especially threatening to the man whose *religion* helps him avoid his humanity. It is at the point of posing that threat that preaching has so much in common with contemporary literature.

The truly biblical preacher takes present human experience seriously at the same time that he tries to understand the inherited tradition. Aware of his own humanity, he refuses to sacrifice the vivid present to the conventional past. At the same time, the very intensity of his present experience convinces him of the value of the tradition. And so he moves in two worlds, forever the man on the boundary.

The man who lives in the world, that is, who opens himself up to people and the life they live, can do the

work of preaching. The worthwhile sermon is worldly, and increasingly the medium of worldly preaching is contemporary literature. The writer, just because he is an artist, is incapable of being "uptight," closed to human experience. The preacher who exposes himself to the artist will preach differently, that is, if his concern with literature is not that of a hack. Such a man, steeped in theology but not "uptight" about conventional Christianity, will be able to preach sermons which are themselves living tradition. That is to say, the preacher who moves from church to world and from the Bible to nonbiblical literature will do in our time something of what the biblical writers themselves did: he will lead men to celebrate *now* the faith they have received.

The sermon has been as closely identified with moralism as with conventionalism. The very word "preaching" connotes negative, judgmental speech. What is more, the man on the street often equates sermonizing with moralizing about very specific personal and social practices. Many sermon buffs feel cheated if the preacher does not pronounce moral judgment on their petty vices; for them the sermon provides a gentle, tolerable flagellation. Whatever the psychological and sociological explanations, the American churchgoer expects ethical advice on a Sunday morning, his lack of concrete response to the preacher's weekly injunctions notwithstanding.

We have quite different expectations where works of art are concerned. The play that moralizes and the novel that gives advice are regarded as less than art. In fact, we are likely to criticize them as "preaching." When we go to a play we expect, though perhaps unconsciously, to see ourselves "fleshed out." A novel speaks to us if it shows

life as we actually live it. Representation of life, says Dorothy Sayers, is the essence of art: "A 'poet' so-called is simply a man like ourselves with an exceptional power of revealing his experience by expressing it, so that not only he, but we ourselves, recognize that experience as our own."³¹ Miss Sayers goes on to stress the word *recognition*. What is essential to art is that one come to see, to see himself and his experience in a new way.

When a man recognizes himself, he is by that very recognition changed. Seeing of this sort is not mere confirmation of what one has always thought but redemptive insight. Dorothy Sayers writes in this connection:

I am not referring to the sort of patronizing recognition we give to a writer by nodding our heads and observing: "Yes, yes, very good, very true—that's just what I'm always saying." I mean the recognition of a truth which tells us something about ourselves that we had *not* been "always saying"—something which puts a new knowledge of ourselves within our grasp. It is new, startling, and perhaps shattering—and yet it comes to us with a sense of familiarity.³²

Art is the opposition of categorical abstraction, of cliché, of pat moralism. The artist decries moralism for the same reason that he rises above mere entertainment: neither takes human experience with sufficient seriousness.

The artistic vision is the death of that moralism which springs from a narrow definition of what it is to be a man. Once we begin to see human beings as the artist sees them, moral bigotry and prescriptive ethics become increasingly untenable. The artist as midwife to self-understanding has

³¹ Dorothy Sayers, "Toward a Christian Poetic," in *The New Orpheus*, ed. Nathan Scott, Jr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 15.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

much to teach the preacher, so prone to a moralistic seconding of culture and dutiful reinforcement of pharisaical attitudes. At this point, one cannot but agree with the new generation who classify people not according to "good" and "bad" but as "open" or "uptight." Preaching too often caters to the uptight, to persons who are aware only of what they are "always saying." Art, on the other hand, leads to such recognition as accords with Jesus' description of the Kingdom as a treasure, or a pearl, which one has only to discover to desire and only to desire to have. The preacher, like the artist, has the vocation of unearthing treasure by opening eyes.

Preaching, like art, is in the indicative more than the imperative mood. The sermon *effects* a new kind of seeing. The ethical imperative, to be sure, is present, but as corollary to recognition. What we recognize as the truth—about ourselves and the world—determines our action. There is in the Christian gospel the closest correspondence between receiving and acting. The preacher speaks because he has been spoken to, as a response to prior action. That prevenient action is not propositional but eventful. The gospel is the news that God has acted and continues to act for his people. That announcement, continuous with the event it heralds, is at once in the indicative mood of liberation and the imperative mood of responsibility. Paul's format in the letter to the Romans, for example, is true to his theology. In the first eleven chapters he tells of God's action. Then in chapter twelve he turns specifically to ethics, beseeching men "by the mercies of God" to present themselves in worthy service. The sermon's demand is inextricable from its glad declaration of God's new order. To see the Kingdom, to recognize what *is*, is to come to moral seriousness

without falling into moralism. That is true because what *is* is the Kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. By definition, that Kingdom can have nothing to do with codes of behavior or self-assured religiosity.

Jesus spoke in parables of the Kingdom. He cast down before men not the pat moralisms so easily manipulated in the service of pharisaism, but little slices of life. The parables were inescapable because they were real, ethically imperative because they led to recognition. Truth was inherent in Jesus' teaching because his words were true to *life*. The decision to which his hearers were forced was not at the level of propositions which could be sidestepped. Men came to see for themselves the nature of things. The only possibility was a decision of the will. Contemporarily, a church may discuss the race question and even declare itself for integration; but the question becomes morally unavoidable when a black man stands before the congregation and asks for membership. Life cannot be dodged; the power of Jesus' preaching was its participation in the everyday world in such a way as to force recognition. He confronted men with the drama of life and left them to decide under the imperative of what they could not avoid seeing.

Story, then, is essential to preaching. It is in story that ontology and ethics—what is and what ought to be—meet. For the Christian, it is *the* Story, the joyful declaration of the Kingdom that leads men to moral decision and responsible action. Preaching, if it is to communicate final succour and ultimate demand,³³ waits on the recovery of story. That is the significance of Edmund Steimle's suggestion that in the American pulpit the need is for a new emphasis upon grace, as opposed to hortatory preaching. As things

³³ Cf. H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 46-49.

now stand, story seldom appears in the pulpit. Preachers pass over the indicative and dwell on the imperative. The result is moralism, in too many quarters the very style of preaching and parish life. Wherever ethics is divorced from its theological ground it ends in moralism or license. But when ethics is the active expression of recognition, of seeing the truth about man and God as shown in Jesus Christ, then the Story produces our own story.³⁴

Moralism is, of course, a form of positivism, and the artist resists it for the reason that he opposes every system which oversimplifies the human situation. A theologian would say that the artist finds intolerable any view of man not based upon a theology of the incarnation. The two classical forms which the doctrine of the incarnation takes in literature are the tragic and the comic. Literature's tragic and comic figures keep man reminded of his humanity and that whatever view he holds of the world must be from his vantage point as a creature of flesh and blood. Literature cannot tolerate any reduction of human experience to dimensions less than those explored by tragedy and comedy.

The tragic man, so unforgetful of his humanity as to be agonized by it, lives in a world of "clashing antinomies" where the ultimate offense is his very existence as a limited and conditioned creature.³⁵ The tragic man asserts himself in the face of insuperable odds, only to come to suffering and through his pain to a clearer perception of the tragic vision, to the further unveiling of his humanity.

The tragic story is, then, a story of man besieged by hazard and adversity, and of man standing at last amid shipwreck

³⁴ Edmund A. Steimle, James A. Gray Lectures, Duke University, November 1966.

³⁵ Nathan Scott, Jr., *The Broken Center* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 128.

and defeat: on some forsaken heath or ash-heap the tragic man comes finally to see himself as outmatched and overborne by the terrible, voiceless Mystery of the world.³⁶

In his very struggle to overcome his finitude, the tragic man comes to a clearer perception of his humanity. The literature of tragedy keeps us reminded—scholarly, scientific, and technological advance notwithstanding—that men are “frail children of dust, and feeble as frail.” Even the most Promethean and the most virtuous are finite flesh and come at last to disintegration and death. If there is hope it is not in confident self-assertion but in the courage to be and to hope when one has shared the tragic vision. Nathan Scott draws a close analogy between the tragic vision and the Christian’s eschatological hope; both are realistic about the human situation and yet hopefully discontent. The difference is in the ground of their hope. For the Christian, hope is eucharistic, looking to the future because of God’s deeds now and in the past. The tragic man, if he continues in merely humanistic self-assertion, may end not in hope but in despair. In any case, he never forgets his humanity, even though it agonizes him. The tragic man repudiates, by his very existence, every all-embracing system which pretends to resolve the contradictions of the human condition.

The comic man, too, keeps us reminded that we are but flesh. He exposes the arrogance of all closed views of existence, the folly of every effort to capture what it is to be human in neat formulas. When we meet the comic man our pretensions are unmasked; we are caught with our socks mismatched, our faces unwashed, our daydreams

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

projected on a public screen. He who meets the comic man is reminded

. . . that he is not really a pure breath of music but a man who eats, sleeps, defecates, catches cold in winter when he doesn't wear his long drawers, and that he had better remember these undignified facts if he wants to retain any dignity as a man.

So the art of comedy reminds us, however far we may venture into the strange corridors of the world or however high we may climb the treacherous mountains of the mind, that we are of the earth and earthy—that we are creatures whose finitude is ineluctable.³⁷

The particular service of comedy is to forestall the persistent human pretension to divinity. Comedy is deeply rooted in earthbound humanness. Always materialistic, the comic man remains unembarrassed at the sight of man with egg on his face or history on his hands. The comic man lives intensely in the present moment, refusing to be kept away from experience by convention or to be distracted out of the present by loyalty to distant abstractions.

Comedy, then, like tragedy, resists positivism as a non-experiential reductionism. Man, it seems, is forever trying to cut himself off from areas of his experience which he cannot manipulate or control. As the writer of the Genesis story knew, man is forever falling from his true status as a creature of God by striving to be something else. The inclination of modern man is to identify himself with science and technology, stellar in their success, to the neglect of nature, feeling, and community. Scott writes in this vein: "This predilection of the self to identify too completely with some special interest or project blinds the self to the integral character of its humanity and thus throws it

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

out of gear with the fundamental norms and orders of human existence."³⁸ In a time when man is less and less able to differentiate between himself and his production, comedy keeps the whole of the human situation in view, keeping man reminded of who he is, indeed, that he is a "who." In that function, comedy is both highly relevant to the situation of technological man and in league with Christian theology.

The preacher who meets the tragic figure and the comic man may be helped on the road to recovering the humanity of preaching. Contemporary literature urges the preacher away from biblical positivism and homiletical conventionalism toward living and speaking to the tragic and comic men among whom he lives. Ranging as widely through the world as unabashed comedy and searching tragedy, literature frees the imagination from a heteronomous view of the world, liberating the preacher from the Protestant cloister and making him more protestant for being more truly catholic.

Contemporary preaching needs to recover its humanity. There is little in the typical sermon to suggest that the good news began with a man who lived among us as the word become *flesh*. What is witnessed to—lowly birth, keeping company with common men, commonplace preaching, cross—is hardly communicated in our sermons. Though the modern world is *not* the world of the Bible, preaching tends to presuppose interest in the Bible as such. The sermon is likely to begin with "My text is" and to rely heavily upon what "the Bible says." Not only does the preacher launch his sermon from a text, but he is likely to boost it along with bits and pieces chosen indiscriminately

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

from the Bible's several kinds of literature. In short, preaching is given to biblical positivism—the reduction of the Christian experience to a relationship with texts. The artist resists such reduction because he knows that life is as complex as tragedy, as vital as comedy. His protest reveals just how religious he is. What could be more absurd than representing religion, the depth of all experience, as simplistic text-mongering. Yet the content of many sermons suggests just that.

Curiously, this supposedly objective preaching is highly subjective. The same preacher who builds his sermon exclusively around a text does so in a most subjective way. Texts, to be sure, are chosen and put forth, but they are developed according to the preacher's mood and within the confines of his limited interests. This suggests, obviously, that a hermeneutical principle *is* operating here. Texts are, as a matter of fact, never understood with pure objectivity. At the same time, the subjectivity which the preacher does actually bring to the Bible is inadequate if not unfortunate. His own limited experience, largely within the cloister, can hardly open to him the Bible's existential import. His need for wider horizons of subjectivity should lead him to the arts.

It is also curious that the American preacher quite often injects personality into the sermon without being really personal. The preacher is center stage, in the spot. The "success" of the church as an organization may depend upon his projecting an aggressive, sometimes flamboyant personality. However, at the same time that he projects this image, the content of his sermons remains impersonal. Honest human meeting is absent, perhaps evaded. The preacher has learned from childhood—from ministers and

laymen—how to be a clerical personality. That conditioning has cut him off from personhood, from honesty about himself, his own feelings, and the human condition. Consequently, his sermons show amazing adeptness at being impersonal. True, the illustrations which the preacher *uses* are often "personal" in the sense of being drawn from private or intense experience. But more often than not they are remote from the present moment or so saintly as to be far removed from where both preacher and people actually live. These fabricated illustrations are likely to be set in the context of theological jargon spoken by a personality displaying an air of confidence and omniscience sufficient to veil his humanity. The canned illustration is simply part of a complex syndrome; the preacher has to resort to stereotyped life to fill out his sermons just because his role as a preacher is not properly related to his humanity.

To sum up, an empirical description of American preaching finds at once biblical positivism and a kind of impersonalism which derives paradoxically from a limited subjectivity. It may well be that preoccupation with texts *and* subjective, impersonal preaching are two sides of the same coin. Neither is grounded in the community's experience of faith, that is, in the reality of being a man among men believing in God.

Preaching has become for many a form of speech in which a limited subjectivity is *expected*. The phenomenon of religious observances which actually serve to evade the present situation is fully as old as the time of the Hebrew prophets and as current as religiosity in retreat from the world. Many churchgoers dote on the conventional sermon, encouraging homiletical conventionalism. The same mentality which avoids "serious" movies and "dis-

turbing" plays is likely to prefer preaching in the conventional style. In short, many churchgoers wish to avoid religious experience. To do that they must shield themselves from profound human experience.

Any artist worthy of the name lives in the present moment. Even when he writes about faraway places and ancient times, he does so as a man of deep concern and high feeling. What he writes we call art just because it represents to us universal human experience. The writer allows no evasion of the present, but brings the past to bear on the present so as to make a future. That is the meaning of tradition, the handing over of the past to the present in a meaning-full way. The writer knows that one can make the present and the future only out of the past. But he knows too that the past remains merely a book or a memory without real concern and openness in the present for what it is—as well as what it has been—to be a man. The preacher who meets the tragic and the comic may begin to move toward such a new awareness as will serve him well in his work as a vehicle of tradition.

The preacher can be truly biblical only as he becomes worldly. In the same way, the preacher becomes more truly protestant, participant in the world and appreciative of its possibilities for revelation, as he becomes more catholic. The wider his view of the world, the more true will be his exegesis of the Bible, the more accurate his understanding of Christian theology, the more apt his sermonic parables and analogies. Most important, the more catholic he becomes the more he will be willing to expose himself as a man living by faith and to meet his parishioners as such persons. In the very humanity of his preaching he will resist heteronomy, whether individual or institu-

tional. To be truly protestant is to be truly catholic; it is to realize, with Augustine, that the human quest for God is as universal in its persistence as various in its expression. Christian faith necessarily is diverse in expressing grace—God's love and concern for each person in his unique humanity.

Accordingly, the content of the Christian sermon may well be steeped in the vision of the tragic man who agonizes in the search. The preacher would do well to see something of the young Augustine in Rabbit Angstrom, Ethan Allen Hawley, and Holden Caulfield. With the help of the contemporary writer, the preacher might see how variously and how seriously men ask religious questions. In the same way, the preacher who takes into his imagination the comic man will speak the better sermon for it. He will find himself less able to represent man as other than flesh, having hope only in grace. And that disability will lead him to a new ability in revealing his own humanity and meeting his people where they live.

Needless to say, the literature itself—novels, plays, poems, movies—will appear in the sermon. What enlarged the preacher's imagination and deepened his sensitivity will become the actual vehicle of communication in some of his sermons. When he reads Updike and Salinger and Steinbeck, Eliot and Wilder, he will say not only "There I am," but "There we are." The skill with which he learns to incorporate the artist's vision into his sermons will determine whether his hearer will eventually say, beyond all evasion, "There we are," and from that go on to rejoice in grace which accepts us just that way, tragic and comic as we are.

Literature and the Form of the Sermon

THE WAG HAS LONG HAD it that a sermon is three points and a poem. The wag is all too apt. Sunday's sermon is predictable: it moves methodically from a stated text through analytical exposition to application, the preacher's effort to end on a "practical" note. The form of preaching, however much the quality of sermons may vary, is rather uniformly pedestrian and analytical, proceeding by logical steps toward a conclusion which tries but often fails to be existential. The churchgoer is surprised by the sermon which deviates from that form.

Prose and Poetry

The very idea of "points and poems" suggests the conflict in today's pulpit. On the one hand, the preacher sees himself in the dual role of teacher and corporate executive. His training in theological school makes him as analytical in matters of religion as the American ethos conditions him to be manipulative, aggressive, and directive. He is likely to organize his sermons as he orders life, systematically and

pragmatically. Whether teaching the Bible, persuading people to join his congregation, raising money, or raising morals, the preacher proceeds by way of a series of effective, demonstrable propositions. He preaches as most Americans live; oriented toward well-defined goals, he moves directly and methodically. Experience is ordered and analyzed point by point, just as one arranges his daily calendar in order at last to be healthy, wealthy, and wise.

The poems which the preacher imports to his sermons suggest another possibility, not because of their quality as poetry but simply because they belong to the genre "poetry." Poetry does in fact order experience, but in a way quite different from sermonic "points." The poet stays much closer to the experience itself, in such a way that poetic form and content reveal what it is to *have* such an experience. Whereas the preacher may begin with, "My text is," or, "I would like to discuss with you . . .," the poet is more likely to start with, so to speak, "Once upon a time." The preacher, in presenting his points, reveals that he has taken a step back from experience. Consequently, his "discussion" tells us that perhaps something did happen once, though not necessarily to him, and now he is commenting upon that remote event. His sermon comes out as a propositional presentation in which we feel nothing happening. In contrast to the poet who introduces us to something which has moved him, the preacher has himself moved away from experience to a realm of logical discourse in which he reveals neither himself nor the event which moves him to speak.

Authentic preaching is in its form more like poetry than scientific or argumentative prose. This is, of course, no plea for sermons in the style of Fibber McGee's closet: a sudden

deluge of this and that. Poetry is always symmetrical by contrast to both disorder and regimentation. What is urged is that preaching like poetry should communicate on the level of a happening. Paul Scherer draws the line between the formal lecture and the sermon:

The one explains, the other at best must fashion. The one instructs, the other at best induces. The one points, the other at best provides. The teacher informs, the lecturer may exhort. The preacher does more. . . . What he says does not go hand in hand with worship or break in on it for a while. What he says occasions worship and provokes it. He does not discuss peace; he gives it birth. He does not point the way to strength; he ministers strength.³⁹

Though Scherer's comparison depends upon a rapidly declining concept of teaching, his point is nevertheless clear: the experience of God is the ground of all theological language. Preaching stays close to that experience, being itself a confession of faith and a vehicle of grace. If preaching is such a confession and such a ministry, then three points and a poem hardly make for suitable form. Preaching as a means of grace requires a special form.

Imaginative literature gives the preacher a clue to that form. In an essay on "Theology and the Literary Imagination" Nathan Scott explains that art has more than utilitarian importance to theology. Indeed, the literary imagination has a propaedeutic function in the Christian thinker's efforts to understand himself and his faith. The poet (in the sense in which we use it, "poetry" includes imaginative literature) represents life in such a way that the reader is able to feel with him what it is like to have a given experience. Of special importance to preaching is the form which

³⁹ Paul Scherer, *For We Have This Treasure* (New York: Harper, 1944), p. 136.

poetry takes in ordering experience. Quoting Northrup Fry, Scott says that poetry does not "line up arguments facing each other like football teams," but rather "dances-out" experience.⁴⁰ Rather than stepping back to organize and analyze, the literary imagination enters, and consequently receives experience and then expresses that participation with all the immediacy of personal involvement. This existential quality of literature precludes the marshaling of arguments and the neat regimentation of propositions. Life does not present itself in that form—life does not *feel* that way—and so such a form is foreign to the poet who refuses to take the step backward at the expense of dancing out man's joy and pain. The forms of poetry are as various as human experience itself. That variety may well be the salvation of a theology prone to reductionism and preaching bent on prosaic argument.

The specific forms of contemporary literature are various indeed, and they need not be mentioned here. The novels of our time range from the tragedy of Faulkner to Updike's clinical description of modern disorder. The newest novels eschew story as such, and in the style of the new cinema move toward the merely episodic, disjointed blow-ups appropriate to modern man's perception of life. One can talk about *the* theater with as little confidence as *the* novel. It is apparent, however, that this is the time of "the splintered stage" when the non-play persists because it does express the modern sensibility. In short, the forms of the literary imagination appear to be directly responsive to changing sensibilities.

The style of contemporary literature has special importance for the theological enterprise. Style is always less sus-

⁴⁰ Scott, *Adversity and Grace*, p. 22.

ceptible of mere utilitarianism than is the content of art, more demanding of personal attention. The man who reads the style, who pays attention to the form, reads deeply. Tillich wrote:

The key to the theological understanding of a cultural creation is its style. Style is a term derived from the realm of the arts, but it can be applied to all realms of culture. There is a style of thought, of politics, of social life, etc. The style of a period expresses itself in its cultural forms, in its choice of objects, in the attitudes of its creative personalities, in its institutions and customs. It is an art as much as a science to "read styles," and it requires religious intuition, on the basis of an ultimate concern, to look into the depth of a style, to penetrate to the level where an ultimate concern exercises its driving power.⁴¹

If one applies what Tillich has said about cultural style generally to the style of contemporary literature, his thesis holds. When one sees *how* the writer has proceeded, he begins to see *why* he has written. The form reveals intention and intention reveals concern. Who can "see" Samuel Beckett's plays without paying attention to their form? The form of the play leads one inevitably to Beckett's meaning, to a deep concern for the anxiety and meaninglessness of Beckett's world. The style of the plays reveals Beckett as religious, communicating a passion for meaning amid the meaninglessness of existence and the wish for God in the absence of God. The concern of the playwright appears in the disjunctive, chaotic form of the drama which springs directly from the artist's own compelling experience of the world. Plays ending "happily ever after" are as unlikely today as rhyming poetry.

⁴¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:40.

Theology and Form

Preaching betrays its theology by the form it takes. In the homiletical movement from religious experience to confessional expression, what one has experienced will determine how he expresses it.

The fact that we are concerned with *Christian* experience forces us to take account of the "faith once delivered to the saints." The Christian preacher, standing in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, does not preach out of his mere subjectivity. The tradition reminds him of the givenness of Christian history, as prevenient to his vocation as baptism is to his personal confession. This objectivity bears upon the preacher when he sits to make an outline of his sermon; what comes first will be determined by his understanding of the tradition. Theology, in short, determines form just as form reveals theology.

A clear example of this is the preaching of Karl Barth. He preached at Basel Prison in 1961 on Isaiah 40:8: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." The sermon is a model of Barth's dependence upon Scripture for the content of his preaching. In the form of the sermon, however, Barth reverses the order of the text. His theological standpoint makes this reversal necessary. Because of his cardinal principle that we must begin with the Revealed Word, Barth has to consider the actual word that has come to the church before he will assess the human situation or preach about the evanescence of man. He writes concerning his outline:

So: *The Word of Our God* remains for ever. I have not forgotten that something else is said first: "the grass withers, the flower fades." We will have to speak of this too; yet here, as very often in the Bible, that which is first will be

understood only after one has heard and understood that which is second. First and foremost, then: "The Word of our God remains for ever."⁴²

Form is determined, then, not by the text per se but by Barth's inner theological dialectic. It is finally the preacher's experience of the whole Christian tradition which suggests the form of his preaching. The specific task of theology is to enable him to see the tradition whole and so to be able to appropriate that tradition to his specific homiletical task.⁴³

But we need not turn to Karl Barth for examples of the direct correspondence between theology and homiletical form. What a man thinks about God appears inevitably in the format of his sermons. The typical lined-out discourse reflects a pat, propositional theology. There is a close affinity between faith as doctrinal subscription and the point-by-point discourse characteristic of the Protestant Sunday morning. The God who needs to be defended, apologized for, proved—and who is consequently in danger of going dead—needs the argumentative, logical, didactic sermon. Or, the God whose word is equated with the Bible must necessarily speak in a form dictated by the biblical texts. If God is taken to be an angry moralist demanding satisfaction, the preacher will present a plea or a diatribe. Preaching informed by such theological presuppositions becomes a series of propositions to be decided upon either positively, as subscription to a "plan of salvation," or negatively, as the decision to shun disapproved behavior. The point at which preaching of this kind becomes "personal"

⁴² Karl Barth, "That Which Remains," *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 52, no. 4 (April 1962): 2.

⁴³ Cf. Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*.

is usually at the end, where evangelistic appeals to embrace the faith or to turn away from the "world" are strongly put.

This form, propositions didactically presented with a concluding forced appeal to personal experience, betrays an inadequate theology. God is virtually identified with creedal religion, Bible, and a pat moral code. The sermonic presentation of God is formally divorced from the actualities of human existence. The form of the sermon suggests to the hearer that God, so ably described in propositional abstractions, meets him only at the place where he makes a "religious" decision for church and morality. God comes across as remote, precisely because of the glib directness of propositional preaching. Whatever is glib and pat must seem remote to men and women today; the style is foreign to our sensibility. For *God* to be confidently presented in the three-points-and-a-poem discourse must be the height of irony *and* parody. Such preaching betrays theology out of touch with history and, therefore, far removed from the God of Israel.

It is just this point which leads us to ask about the special responsibility of the *Christian* preacher. Standing as he does in a particular historical tradition, is it not his duty to teach Christian doctrine and to recount the foregoing history of God's people? Does he not neglect the faith once delivered to the saints when he departs from preaching doctrinal and textual sermons? The answer to those questions depends upon what the preacher means theologically when he says that God is the God of *history*. Does he mean only that God is the Lord of *a* history or of all history? Does God's lordship over a particular history preclude his revelation in all history? Can one say that past

history is more important than today's history? Has any man access to any history whatever apart from his situation *now*?

When all of these questions have been put, then one can say that the preacher does have a special obligation to the Christian tradition. He is, after all, a Christian. He is called to proclaim the kerygma, a unique story. But let him remember even as he takes up that vocation that the kerygma is not propositional didacticism. Holy history is itself nonpropositional. Jesus Christ, standing at the heart of that history, is presented in the kerygma as a person to be met and reckoned with. He is met in his deeds and words, in a form of teaching radically different from the scribal didacticism of his own day. In brief, the very nature of the holy history with which we have to do suggests that propositional didacticism is an inappropriate homiletical form. The Gospels themselves suggest instead eventful narrative, the mundane parable, story, drama, and imaginative impressionism as suitable forms for declaring good news.

Theological perspective will determine whether we risk new forms. In this matter neither a purely experiential nor a wholly dogmatic theology is adequate. Rather, the historico-ontological method, appreciating both the place of the inherited tradition and the hermeneutical significance of present experience, can help us to move toward new forms in preaching. Paul Tillich, while insisting that Christian theology is based on the unique event of Jesus the Christ, urged: "The sources of systematic theology can be sources only for one who participates in them, that is, through experience."⁴⁴ Tillich dissented from Schleiermacher's attempt

⁴⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:40.

to derive all the contents of the Christian faith from a general religious consciousness, and in doing so he made a large place for holy history. At the same time, Tillich appreciated Schleiermacher's great contribution: the redirection of theology away from propositional dogmatism toward the realm of human experience. Tillich wrote: "Experience is not the source from which the contents of systematic theology are taken but the medium through which they are existentially received."⁴⁵ Barth, in this connection, would say that we do not become contemporaneous with Jesus Christ as God's revealed word by means of a historical reconstruction but by God's free act. Though we may disagree with Barth as to the ambit of that free act, we nevertheless agree with his major premise: faith in Jesus Christ depends upon both holy history—jelled in dogma, Scripture, and liturgy—and upon existential experience. Once that relationship between dogmatic and experiential theology is clear, one can go on to run the risk of a new form for preaching. Historico-ontological perspective opens the door to the greatest innovation without confusing new forms for the Word with a merely irresponsible word of man. God, as the free Lord of his Word, speaks still and widely in human experience as he has clearly spoken in Jesus Christ and Israel before him.

Wherever men seek to reduce the Word of God to less than that freedom, to impose inappropriate and inadequate forms, the word of man poses as the Word of God. That is the case whether or not the sermon is oriented to a text, replete with theological propositions, or straightforward in its God-talk. The word of man is unmistakable in its approach and in its results; it skirts the present moment and

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

so misses holy history's meaning, that is, misses *holy* history. On the other hand, failing to appropriate holy history seriously to the living of the present moment, it sees that history as mere past to be gotten at propositionally or by reconstruction. In either case, the man who lives under the word of man is cut off; cut off from the tradition and from the meaning of his present experience, since it is only in the meeting of experience and holy history that either has meaning. Here lies the pathos of Luther's words:

As often as the Word of God is preached it makes men's consciences before God happy, broad and certain, because it is a word of grace and forgiveness, a good and beneficial word. As often as the word of man is preached, it makes men's consciences in themselves sad, narrow, and anxious, because it is a word of law, wrath, and sin pointing to what man has not done and all that he ought to do.⁴⁶

The Word of God meets a man as a word of grace, and, as such, it has an appropriate if highly elusive form. Any man who knows grace understands that it is as unpredictable in its form as it is absolutely assured in its availability. That is what Charles Williams sees in his play *Grab and Grace*, in which the sprightly boy is as changeable in his appearance as ever present when needed.

Now what is the homiletical form appropriate to the good news of the Word of God? It is much easier to say what that form is not: didactic, propositional, stereotyped, woodenly textual, moralistically categorical. A positive reconstruction will necessarily remain unreconstructed, relying upon impressions of a given situation, inventiveness, spontaneous innovation. But the principle is clear: faith as

⁴⁶ Quoted in Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 12.

personal relationship and dynamic commitment demands a form which actually meets people now. Grace, as sure in its presence as fleeting in its form, calls for preaching both well grounded and yet free for the moment. The Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation require that attention be paid to the concrete. The doctrine of redemption asserts the significance of unique individuals, the particular moment in history. The cardinal tenets of Christian theology place before what ought to be the *actual* human condition, both as fallen and redeemed. Where theology determines form, the affinity between theology and the literary imagination is apparent. In the actual work of preparing sermons, the works of the literary artist are instructive in form as well as provident in content.

Good News in Good Form

First, then, by way of suggesting the sermon's form, the preacher ought not to be embarrassed by story. Israel lived by story. What she had to say about God and the meaning of life was told from father to son: the stories of the garden; the remembered patriarchs and their enslaved sons in Egypt; the epic of the Exodus and the bold sagas of the new land and Israel's brave leaders. The greatest of Israel's preachers, the prophets, relied upon drama to carry meaning; Jeremiah wore a yoke of iron and smashed dishes in the streets of a threatened Jerusalem. Ezekiel the exile lay siege to his own house and cut his hair as one already captured. Amos used carpenter's tools to speak of justice and offered a basket of summer fruit to decaying Samaria. Word and event were one in Israel's faith. History and everyday things, the stuff of story, were the vehicles of revelation as they were life itself.

A tendency toward abstraction has accompanied the inclination of Western man to differentiate himself from nature and to minimize the significance of ordinary human experience. There is the closest connection between the current ecological crisis, for example, and the more subtle spiritual crisis. The man who comes to think of himself apart from the story of his people and to relegate to the realm of children's tales his own personal story is likely to manipulate and exploit not only nature but his fellows. The love of story, on the other hand, suggests a historical sense as well as theological insight.

The man who is willing to enter into story and to rely upon it to carry profound meaning takes seriously the concrete world of everyday. The parables of Jesus, the poetry of Robert Frost, the detailed prose of Styron, the seeming trivia of a book like *Travels with Charley*, the raw materialism of Flannery O'Connor, the vivid daydreaming of Bellow's Herzog and Henderson—all join in a basic confidence in the revelatory possibilities of the commonplace. Story as a form assumes the involvement of man in the world of things and persons and speaks of the meaning of life in that milieu. In that sense, story is oriented toward history, though the very power of story is vitiated when one insists upon historical "accuracy" or detached analysis.

The preacher is one who tells a story, not only that resounding in the Gospels but that of man's daily life in a given community. That story is the preacher's own; he lives in the tradition and among the people to whom he speaks. Worldly, he moves among mundane things and ordinary people, and it is that world which provides the scenario for his sermons. A holy materialism comes out in his preaching as the willingness to tell a story and to

rely upon that story to communicate the gospel. Like Jeremiah donning his yoke or Amos with his basket of fruit, the preacher *becomes* a story. Like the artist, he no longer finds storytelling embarrassing but as essential to preaching as to the faith he has inherited and the life he lives.

The Christian doctrine of redemption suggests, in the second place, a proper formal sequence. Men are redeemed long before they are fully aware of the implications of that redemption. The proper sequence of preaching is the glad declaration that God has redeemed all men, that is, that God in love accepts every man as he is now. Salvation is coming to see the situation as it is; that we do indeed live under the fall, but that the final—and therefore prior—truth is that we *have been* redeemed. The Kingdom is a treasure already there, only to be discovered and recognized for its value. Discovery and recognition carry in themselves the ethical power of the gospel.

That is to say, the preacher is called to declare the good news and only then to exhort men. The sequence is actually not so much a matter of one thing following upon another as it is the dawning of a new reality which illumines the whole of life. If the preacher believes that to be the definitive word—men are surely fallen but finally redeemed—his format will reveal his theology. In the actual form of the sermon, the first word will be proclamation of the human situation as redeemed. As with Paul's letter to the Romans, admonition will always follow proclamation, usually as to position and always in allocation of time.

It is hardly necessary to labor the parallels with contemporary literature. The artist, too, attempts to show the

human situation as it is. He has little to say about what *ought* to be except by implication, either negative or positive. Of course, the artist does not necessarily proceed on the assumption of Christian redemption. But he does begin where people are (he may go on from there to imply at least the need for the Christian gospel). That is the lesson to be learned by the preacher too prone to be hortatory. Theology requires the sermon to emulate literature at this point, to address the actual human situation, though "actual" may connote a great deal more for the Christian than for a given artist.

Third, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith calls for indirection and understatement. At this point, theology indicates a form very close to the style and technique of the artist. Truth as insight comes to man in a special way. The gospel, accordingly, comes under a special form, in a unique style. In fact, the truth of grace is inseparable from the form in which it is communicated. Just as a theory of aesthetics holds that reality is completed in art, so the work of grace is completed in its communication.

Art persists because man needs a picture of the world more perceptive than a snapshot; he needs to hear more clearly than a tape recorder. He requires insight, *personal* knowledge. Art responds specifically to these emotional and spiritual needs, its form determined by its mission. Precisely because of its intention, art does not try merely to reproduce the world. Rather, the artist makes the world visible in a new way. Cézanne's cubist mountain hardly looks like a mountain that a camera would capture. Yet one sees in the painting something of the essence of the mountain which he could never see in a mere reproduction. Poetry, music, painting, the novel, and the play strike truth

to man's being that comes to him in no other way. So Picasso makes sense when he calls art "a lie that makes us realize the truth." In artistic expression one comes to that personal knowledge which is so close to faith. This point is of special importance for preaching. The reality of grace is incomplete until it is personally apprehended, and grace is met under a certain style.

The language of faith, like that of art, is not so much statement as dramatization. And the chief characteristics of dramatization are indirection and understatement, in keeping with the intention of "handing over," of creating insight and evoking response, of setting a "trap for meditation."

A good play, for example, seldom makes speeches. The artist simply places the reader in a position where he can see for himself. When he sees, no speech is necessary, and if he does not, then a speech is quite useless. "The meaning of life must come alive through spontaneous appreciation. And here art proves to be a distinct and irreplaceable medium for apprehending and transmitting truth. It alone provides the means of seeing life whole."⁴⁷

The artist subdues the temptation to break over into speech-making. He lets story speak, in the confidence that the reader or viewer will come onto the stage and himself act out the truth. The indirectness of art must never be taken for indifference. Indirection is, paradoxically, the most powerful form of propaganda in that the intention of its author is near to passion and the response elicited is accordingly intense.

His understanding of the human situation and of the nature of faith led Søren Kierkegaard to attempt indirect

⁴⁷ E. W. Jones, *Preaching and the Dramatic Arts* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 32.

communication of the gospel. He knew that there are many things which cannot be told in direct propositions, especially those things most important to human beings. A man does not discover what is personally significant by reading textbooks. He learns, for example, the meaning of the words *I love you* from the tone of the voice, the caress, and the continuing relationship, rather than from declarative statements. The grace of God, too, thought Kierkegaard, calls for a particular form of communication.

Kierkegaard's Denmark, in the mid-nineteenth century, epitomized Christendom. To be born a Dane was to be baptized a Christian; Christianity was as universal as it was nominal. Faith, it seemed, had lost its dynamic power in becoming little more than being born into the church and subscribing to its creeds. Kierkegaard believed that grace could not be taken so matter-of-factly and that faith was fully as personal and demanding as the relationship of marriage. He came to see his vocation as communicating Christianity to Christendom, and in that vocation he spoke in a way consonant with the nature of the gospel.

Kierkegaard refused to preach the "blunt truth." He denied that Christian truth could be neatly packaged and delivered to another in the form of creeds or propositional preaching. Kierkegaard did not aim to tell the truth; the people of his day had missed the truth because they were quite sure they had it. Rather, the pensive Dane tried to lead men to confront themselves so that they could gain truth for themselves. His peculiar strategy was to help a man on his spiritual pilgrimage by tripping him. He wrote under pseudonyms and from opposing points of view, hoping that in the clash of various opinions the reader might come to some conclusions of his own.

Kierkegaard emphasized the indirectness and understatement of the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ God did surely come to men, but as one requiring nothing less than faith, that new relationship upon which one enters by taking a leap in the dark. God reveals his deepest secrets to men who willfully commit themselves while standing on the razor's edge between faith and doubt, to men who pray, "Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief." It is in the grace of God to accept a man in his freedom—freedom which is the very possibility of faith. Søren Kierkegaard's indirect communication of the gospel sprang directly from his own existential experience of freedom. It is true that later in his career Kierkegaard abandoned pseudonyms and came out to declare openly his Christian vocation. But he continued to assert the permissiveness of that grace which demands no less than the free commitment of faith.

If grace is divine acceptance and demand, meeting each man in his unique personhood, then gracious preaching will meet persons accordingly. And if faith is a dynamic relationship between a man and God, then the language leading men to faith is of a special type. By an indirect method men are brought to see for themselves and to commit themselves. To that end, the preacher declines to speak the blunt truth which has a way of becoming untruth. Indirection and understatement seem especially important at a time when nominal Christianity and glib God-talk have combined to elicit the feeling that behind all the creeds and the sermons God is dead. The point is: preaching has for its aim bringing men into a relationship with God whose attribute is grace. If that is the intention, then the form of the sermon will be radically different from what we hear on an ordinary Sunday morning.

The intention of the proclaimer of grace is similar to that of the artist. When one asks the artist's aim he gets a rough sketch of the preacher living in grace and bent upon arousing faith. The artist's work derives from his vision of the world and his sense of oneness with it, and his aim—giving expression to what he sees and feels—is to help others to see and feel that they too belong. This is not to say that the artist has a program or a plan of action to put across; his art is not pragmatically conceived. But the artist's passion reveals that he has seen and aims to elicit seeing.

In an essay on "Religion and the Mission of the Artist," Denis de Rougement argues that art is not utilitarian; but modern men, for all their pragmatism, need it. Nor is the aim of art beauty; the artist does not try to make beauty but to express reality, even at the cost of ugliness. "The aim (conscious or not) of all true art is to make objects which signify; therefore, it is to make one attentive to the meaning of the world and of life."⁴⁸ In the form which emerges, the thing to be expressed is completed. It is an axiom of aesthetics that what the artist expresses does not need to be fully understood by him prior to the work itself. It is as if the thing to be expressed were itself moving toward expression and in the work of art offering its meaning to the one trapped for meditation. In this movement toward expression, form is essential to meaning: "To express a message of truth, but 'no matter how,' is almost certainly to express something altogether different from the message in question."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ In *The New Orpheus*, ed. Nathan Scott, Jr., p. 65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

The "message" of art, as de Rougement sees it, is about liberation, human destiny, and love. He uses the most provocative verbs to describe the artist's way of expressing that message: elicit, manifest, render sensible, evoke, build, reveal, induct, trap, bribe. As one who is grasped and liberated, the artist is himself coming to deeper understanding and greater freedom. Consequently, he tells his truth with the humility of one telling himself. The verbs appropriate to such telling are equally applicable to preaching. They are the verbs of grace and faith; they celebrate what is and lead men to join the celebration. These verbs point to that opening up of the order of creation which leads to redemption. They suggest the breaking in of truth as the incarnation recurs. The preacher's creed—that God works in history and in so creaturely a thing as human speech—leads him to the humble forms of the artist, to the world of the everyday and commonplace. And the preacher's aim, to elicit nothing less than faith, counsels him, not to "tell it straight," but to set a trap for meditation. The artist and the preacher are moved by their mission to a common form which revels in the creation itself and suggests the meaning of life by reference to man's world, the world symbolized by Jesus' birth at Bethlehem as the Word become flesh in such a way that we beheld in him the glory of the Father.

The sermon, in taking the dramatic form of indirection, may take a cue not only from the artist but from the presentation of Jesus in the Gospels. The Incarnation is at once historical—"in the days of Caesar Augustus"—and steeped in the mystery characteristic of the Fourth Gospel. That the Word had become flesh was never obvious; he did not ride in an open car with his flags flying. Jesus' ministry was so ambiguous that some men bowed to him and some

would have stoned him as a devil. The gospel's story of birth, life, death, and resurrection could hardly be more concrete, more materialistic. But in the Gospels themselves it is clear that the *meaning* of the days of his flesh depends upon insight and personal commitment. It is in the giving of insight, of a perspective of faith, that dramatic indirection informs preaching. The aim of preaching, like that of the artist, is not finally to speak but to cause to speak.

The Man Is the Message

In preaching, more so than in art, the man is the message. Though the church has long since declared that the validity of its sacraments does not depend upon the character of its clergy, the preacher is inevitably involved in the message he speaks. There is small tolerance for a credibility gap between pulpit and pew. It is, however, of the greatest importance to understand what is meant by identifying the man and the message so as not to locate the authenticity of preaching where it does not lie, that is, in the preacher's piety or posturing.

That preaching is earthy is most evident in its form as the speech of one man to a given community. This human provenance is at once the peril and the promise of preaching. A Barthian has written:

It is in the weakness of the human word that God confronts us with Himself, and we would miss the point completely if we were to understand this as an unfortunate and special burden for our faith. The very contrary is true: it is because of God's infinite mercy and wisdom that He has chosen our human words to make Himself known to us.⁵⁰

A man speaking to men and women in a given moment—that is the form of the sermon; and in that form preach-

⁵⁰ Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation*, p. 75.

ing is the ongoing expression of the Incarnation. The particular vehicle of the Word is a man whose humanity is the medium of the message. As such a medium, the greatest responsibility the preacher has is to reveal his humanity. The promise of preaching depends for its realization not upon the minister's conventional saintliness or even his talents, but upon his personhood.

This suggests, of course, that preaching is here to stay, though conceivably not in its traditional form. The notion of the man as the message suggests that preaching is both as essential to the gospel as the Incarnation, and as versatile as human personality and imagination. Anyone who questions the place of preaching in the church must answer the question both theologically and imaginatively. Is human speech about God dispensable, or does the gospel itself demand preaching? On the other hand, does the theological answer to that question suggest a more imaginative approach to preaching? To make this clear: if preaching is essential to the gospel as the good news of the Incarnation, are we actually preaching in a form which proclaims God with us? Or is the medium, by virtue of a failure of the imagination, negating the message as we conceive it theologically? Christian theology suggests that it is a witnessing man among men who can communicate the gospel. The question we must ask is how we can proceed to fulfill that vocation.

Anyone interested in that question might well pay attention to the current film, based on the older, more complex book by Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. The chief protagonist is a deaf-mute, ironically named John Singer. The plot is simple: Lonely people are trying to meet kindred spirits. The crippled husband

reaches out to his harassed wife. Mick, the girl, finds communion with Mozart, similar to what she finds with her furtive schoolboy lover. The black physician, who has cut himself off from whites, runs in a moment of desperate loneliness to catch John Singer. At the end of the movie, the doctor and the girl meet by the deaf-mute's grave where neither is able to say what was special about John Singer. What is clear, however, is that the man who really "listened" to the persons around him was the one who could not take hearing for granted. And the person who really communicated was the one who could not speak.

John Singer is remarkable because among men who seldom listen and who are forever talking without communicating, he without hearing or speech meets people by means of an open countenance, music, candy, his very handicap, and, above all, attention. Out of his silent world he speaks with uncanny eloquence—with eyes and hands, but especially by being so intensely *present*. John Singer does not, because he cannot, operate by cliché. Under the same necessity, he reveals his humanity. He meets each person in each moment and, as if driven by passion, relies upon imaginative wit to engage that person.

Now the relevance of this for preaching is more than tangential. Each of us has embedded in his psyche a certain preconception about what preaching is. We know how preaching sounds, what it is about, what it is supposed to do. We are surprised when a sermon surprises us. And when we set out to preach we do it as if we knew far in advance of meeting the congregation precisely how to communicate with them. The result is preaching by cliché.

Only the *intention* to communicate and the resort to imagination can save preaching from cliché. It is just when

the preacher has done his theological homework—when he sees that he is called to be with men, as a human being for God—that he will cease to take speech about God for granted and begin to communicate by revealing himself. Without theological insight into preaching as incarnation of the Word, the preacher will continue to bury his own humanity—to prevent the Word's becoming flesh—by adherence to mere homiletical convention and for want of that imagination born of passionate intention.

Speech has the possibility both for effecting communication and for inhibiting human intercourse. Talk can bridge the gap between people, or it can be a barrage which keeps persons at a distance. Everything depends upon what is intended. Take, for example, polite well-mannered conversation; there is the possibility of bringing people together. But when people do not intend human intercourse, polite speech becomes a defensive mechanism. The current protest against propriety in speech, dress, and behavior may be in part jelled disillusion with that society which uses speech and manners as a smokescreen rather than as a means of unveiling and meeting.

Now if preaching has any place at all (and here one is speaking quite theologically) it is as a possible place for authentic meeting between man and man. In this human meeting where men speak of God, all false dichotomies between sacred and secular are overcome. This is an event in which the place of God is the place of man's meeting with man. If preaching fails to be human meeting, then preaching has failed. For the man is the message.

Recently the author sat listening to a well-wrought sermon: careful style, logical arrangement, accurate exegesis, apt application. But as I listened, I asked

a question: What is going on here which would not be going on if I were reading what this man has written rather than listening to him read it? There was little of the man in either the content or the delivery of the sermon. Preoccupied with his papers, he was not meeting the congregation. Consequently, the message that God is with us—the subject of every sermon—was blunted. How much more would have happened there if the man's intention to meet us personally had come across. As I reflected on the sermon, it became clear that the Christian message depends on much more than speaking and hearing words. It depends upon the man and his revealed intention to meet as a human being with other human beings. We must ask, in developing homiletical rubrics, to what degree the human form of preaching—tone, posture, personal style, movement—reveals our intention so as to foster or block the good news.

Imaginative communication risks self-exposure, but that is the whole point of emphasizing the man as the message. It is his humanity which reveals the gospel. The preacher is never closer to authentic proclamation than when he lets other men see his humanity in close connection with God-talk. The gospel *is* grace, and the clearest revelation of grace is a human being speaking meaningfully of God. In such speech, grace is clearly shown in the very form of the revelation as God's unconditional lovingkindness. The man becomes the message when it becomes clear to his hearers that this man of faith is a man like themselves. When the preacher makes his own humanity visible, the congregation is able to make the confession: "God knows what it is to be me, and he loves me." Preaching—faithful speech in the context of a frank humanity—is essen-

tial to the gospel. It is in this profoundly theological sense that the man is the message.

The preacher is prone to be a scrupulous social puppet. That is, the preacher plays a role as he makes his pastoral rounds and when he preaches. The pulpit voice and the pious manner are two elements of the ministerial syndrome. Both block the communication of grace and the awakening of faith. The minister who seems different from ordinary men can hardly incarnate the gospel. The self-consciously pious man unwittingly redefines the nature of faith by the form of his message, the doctrinal content of his preaching notwithstanding. Faith is misunderstood as a certain posturing, pious effort at a behavioral style rather than personal commitment to one worthy of trust when nothing else, least of all one's own powers, is trustworthy. It is the *human* man, the one like the weak man on the cross, revealing the grace of God by revealing his own humanity, who is the message.

I recall an evening of folksinging, at which three young students strummed and sang. The immediate impression was that these men were relaxed and intensely present. They talked easily with the audience and when they forgot the lyrics felt free to improvise. They seemed preoccupied neither with the "subject matter" nor with themselves as performers. Consequently, they were engaging, leading the audience into a shared experience. What they sang—folk music having to do with life, love, and death—was reinforced by their down-to-earth style. The bards' willingness to be themselves was the moving accompaniment to their earthy lyrics. They were, in fact, the message.

If one compares the folksingers with the preacher—their mundane candor with the labored oratory of the

pulpit—he may see the importance of form. As it is, the preacher is usually far from relaxed, reluctant to expose his own fears and joys, and conscious of himself as a performer. Probably the average preacher feels insecure in the pulpit and seeks the security of an impersonal oratory and a confident clerical pose. It should, no doubt, strike us as strange that a man would feel insecure in the community of faith, fearful of exposing his humanity in the community of *grace*. But that is nevertheless the case. Any objective observer of the Sunday morning service will see little to suggest that preaching is authentic personal encounter. The preacher is somehow able to avoid the truly personal and to go on for twenty minutes without meeting men and women in the moment in which they live. Too few men are willing to be the message, a message which demands for its form what every man has, an honest humanness.

The relationship of the preacher to his specific product is more direct than in the case of the artist. The preacher is involved in the giving of a sermon to a congregation as the writer is not personally present when one reads a book or sees a play. The preacher is *there*, and all the subtleties of personal mien combine with what is said to make the message.

But when the difference is clear, the correspondence in form remains. The writer's understanding of common human experience is his stock-in-trade. We are able in reading good literature to identify with the characters and thus with the artist (who obviously "knows" them). Any work of art worthy of the name reveals the artist's sensitivity to human interests. That is the hallmark of art. The artist—his opinions on issues are quite irrelevant here—reveals his concern in what he writes, and so reveals his humanity.

His ability so to reveal himself and his experience of the world is his genius.

The preacher has the opportunity to reveal himself as a man. That he does so is crucial for what he has to say about God. The setting in which he speaks, so different from that of the artist, makes it especially incumbent upon him to declare his worldliness. The Protestant clergy have long been sequestered in a protected world of piety, a cloister imposed by the churches' expectations. The preacher, like the artist, can share in human concerns only by joining the world. Whether he has done so will be apparent in the way he speaks, his willingness to confess his doubts and fears, in his openness to his own experience and that of his people. It is only the worldly man who can be the message of grace, the awakener of faith.

Contemporary literature and Christian theology agree in the form they suggest for preaching: story, a proper sequence between grace and ethics, indirection and understatement, the man as the message. Such a form makes a large place for literature in the content of the sermon and gives to story a prime place in the sermon's format. The preacher must take concrete experience—the material of literature—as seriously as he takes his own experience. That is to say, the return to story is of a piece with the emphasis upon personal experience, just as indirection and a properly derived ethic are corollaries of faith as personal relationship. Preaching in this form, taking the actualities of human existence with complete seriousness, is truly historical, by contrast to that static view of faith and history which produces propositional subscription to doctrine, an impossible legalism, and indifference to life in the present.

Both theology and literature suggest that whatever is important to a man happens to him as a man now. Any purely linear view of preaching is inadequate. That is to say, preaching which moves through a period of time discussing propositions only to come to a logical conclusion hardly serves the Word of God. Authentic preaching is a meeting, perhaps a series of meetings, in which "interface" occurs, that is, where persons are actually present to each other. Story, indirection, personal involvement, self-revelation—these forms lead to interface, to actual meeting with other men by imaginative identification. There the Word of God occurs, breaking through where men intend to tell good news to other men rather than to give a sermon in twenty minutes. In such preaching, there is room for celebration, a place for the gospel to arrive as surprise and gift.

Rubrics

HOMILETICAL RUBRICS

are guidelines, no more. What grasps the preacher, compelling him to communication, determines the content and form of his sermon. He is not at liberty to use literature at all until he has been "used" by it. To impose, or even to provide stereotyped patterns would subvert our purpose—that the minister moved by literature should express his experience homiletically. This chapter sets out guidelines which may simplify the preacher's work and, to some degree, shape his experience for presentation in the church's worship.

The Sermon in a Nutshell

Let us assume, then, that a work of art has chosen the preacher. Having been grasped, let him have another look. That is, he should go through the piece again, musing and making marginal notes on what transpires between himself and the work. In due course, the preacher's contemporary concerns will lead him to focus on certain motifs and to mark certain passages. At this point it is often helpful to make an index in the back of the book. (Inevitably, theological words appear in such an index.) Throughout this second perusal, let the reader give himself time to muse, even if on the run. He should let the story live with him, moving through his mind as he moves through the world.

Musing and running may seem incompatible. But there is no need for illusion: most of our sermons are worried into being. The average preacher has to preach too often. Harassed by vying tugs for attention, he has little time for ordinary musing, for dreaming and the free play of imagination. The facts of the modern ministry indicate that he may expect to continue to preach on the run. As a matter of fact, however, that may be a creative way to preach, depending upon where, how, and in what company he runs.

The preacher may run through the world with a lively sense of vocation, breathing the air of the Christian tradition and in the company of imaginative artists. Somewhere along that course the ideas for sermons will arrest him. As he moves and is moved the concerns of the moment will lead him to articulate an idea. It is impossible to say when and where the idea is born, just as it is impossible to write a sermon without its birth. The idea contains, in germinal form, the whole of the sermon. Once articulated in a succinct sentence, in language available to the man on the street, the idea determines the form and content of the sermon. If the preacher can reduce to a nutshell what has moved him, that sentence will virtually write the sermon. No sermon should be written before it has been stated in one clear sentence. That seminal idea emerges as the preacher muses on what has moved him and as his movement in the world fixes his attention. Actually, this is a two-way street: the preacher's involvement with the people to whom he ministers will cause him to see the work of art in perspective; and, in the other direction, the work will cause him to speak to them in a certain way. A work of art and the preacher's world of work meet to hone the

sermon's idea. Once that idea is sharpened, the preacher may go on to exegesis.

Exegesis and the Recovery of Story

Begin with the story. Contemporary literature is, by definition, all that introduction and exegesis should be. Under the rubrics of classical homiletics, introduction should engage the contemporary situation and suggest the sermon's direction. Exegesis, following quickly upon the heels of introduction, draws out the salient elements of the text so that one clear idea emerges. When treating a work of literature, the preacher has only to tell the story. Narrative will engage his congregation, show the general direction of his thought, and begin the formation of a clear idea. The story itself creates the teachable moment and hints, if ever so subtly, what is to come.

Simply tell the story. Tell the story simply. That is quite a large order for an American preacher. As a people we have all but lost the art of storytelling. We have, perhaps, lost the art because we have lost confidence in the power of story. The technological mentality acts directly upon people, just as it manipulates machines in the subjugation of nature. We relate to human beings not by way of a shared story—a community of history—but by means of promotional techniques, direct moral admonitions, economic and social coercion. For example, who does not feel that we strain at trying to share a common story on such occasions as the Fourth of July?

People in less technological societies live by a shared story. For them, it is story which is preeminently powerful in binding people together. For example, the author traveled for six weeks among the Maori, a tightly knit Poly-

nesian community in New Zealand. The Maori religious meeting which I attended lasted for three days, during which the people ate and slept together as conscientiously as they shared worship and speechmaking. Their deliberations were quite unlike what we know in America. Rather than taking sides and attempting to convince each other of one position or another, the people lived together through three days of storytelling, both as verbal story and as living experience. The speeches were given mostly by the elders and were largely rehearsals of Maori history. At the end of the encampment, the community arrived at consensus, bound together not by subscription to propositional creed but by a shared story, one inherited and ongoing.

In preaching, the need is not for engineered communication but for speech that emanates from the tidal realities which sweep our own lives. People need to hear story in the pulpit. James Muilenburg used to announce to our Old Testament class that he was going to the movies: he had to participate in a story. Muilenburg is, after all, an Old Testament man. Like Israel, he knows the meaning of living in events and being related to other people not by a cash nexus, clichéd patriotism, or social expediency, but by a shared history. Surely the preacher who sees meaninglessness in the faces of men and women today can understand the need for story, for setting out pieces of human experience in which people adrift can live, in which a community can cohere. There is a sense, as every Christian should know, in which we live with each other when we hear a story together.

The story may seem commonplace or it may be well-worn with much repetition. That is no reason not to tell it. How little we understand of people when we think that

they are bored by what is familiar. The preacher who *refers* to stories—to the parables of Jesus, the biblical narratives, Old Testament drama—as if story could be used to document something more vitally significant than the story itself, does not understand how people live. People actually do live in stories. Where the nation and the church lose their ability to include people in a common story, men and women withdraw into a private world of story—the family, the gang, television drama, unhealthy fantasy. The love of the new, the private, and the bizarre thrive upon the failure to communicate the timeless stories in which the whole community has its life. Who can deny the connection between the ahistorical character of American life and the violence, alienation, and anomie which wrack the land?

So, let the preacher tell the story. A sermon from literature does not merely refer to something the preacher has read. On the contrary, the literature has a place in the pulpit only because it has moved the preacher and has power to engage the community's imagination. That being the case, there is no abstract or propositional "truth" which might be more important than the story itself. If it is the case that people live not by propositions but by story, then the preacher's first task is to tell the story. It is quite conceivable that an entire sermon might be the telling of a story appropriate to a specific occasion.

Be selective in telling the story. Such a rubric may suggest that the preacher is to wrest the story to his preconceived purposes. He does, of course, come to literature as a Christian. It is also the case that he speaks to a specific congregation having peculiar needs. These considerations necessarily lead the preacher to be selective, but not in any manipulative way. The limitation of time is also a factor.

The preacher simply cannot parade an entire novel before the congregation. Most importantly, the sermon should be singular in its thrust. To achieve that, the preacher must be selective of passages for quotation and elements of the story for emphasis.

Trust the story. Preachers are given to the hard sell and to oversimplification. The old rubric is: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them." Any man who believes in the power of story to change attitudes and to shape human life will drop the first admonition. A storyteller holds off a bit. As McLuhan has said, the cool approach invites participation. To trust art is to let the story speak in its complexity; there is no need to try to make things "fit." Literature invites participation because it tolerates complexity and relativity. It is precisely involvement in story which is moving and promising of redemption. For that reason, the preacher who trusts the story will allow the literature itself to get into the sermon. He will refuse to abstract out of the piece. Rather, the dialogue, the actual words and images of the artist, will speak in the pulpit. The preacher who tells the story as if he trusts it has not a little in common with Jesus, who could speak in a homely parable, even in a time of crisis or in the presence of his critics, just because his trust was in God and in his wisdom which saves men by story.

Exposition: A New Hearing for the Tradition

The place of theology in the sermon has been assigned by classical homiletics to exposition. Having treated a biblical passage in its historical and literary setting, the preacher brings to it the church's interpretation. Christian doctrine, church history, and the symbolic tradition appear

in this second movement of the sermon. The exposition is likely to depend heavily upon distinctly theological language and to be remote from the present situation both for its abstraction and dogmatism. The question rises: Does theology properly occupy such a place in preaching? Or must we differentiate between the preacher's theological work in his study and his theological vocation in the pulpit?

Though there is considerable ambiguity in the use of the word, a general rule holds: think theologically, speak non-theologically. The distinction between thinking and speaking is, of course, oversimplified for the very purpose of distinguishing the minister as theologian from the minister as preacher. Again by way of qualification of the rubric, theological work is less and less distinguishable from worldly involvement and the common life. But the rubric holds as a necessary corrective to the accepted tendency in exposition to remove oneself to an esoteric world of specialized vocabulary and rigid dogmatism.

One comes to see the inadequacy of traditional approaches to exposition when he tries to preach from contemporary literature. That enterprise is based upon the contiguity of the place of God and the place of man. The theological movement of the sermon is no less worldly for being theological. That means that the boundaries between exegesis-exposition-application are arbitrary and perhaps misleading. Where would one locate the Word of God in the sermon? Is one movement to be regarded as more "theological" than another? Or does the theological act in fact occur where Christian faith is required to define and understand itself in relation to man's present situation? In bringing Christian theology to bear in the sermon does

one take a step backward from the present moment into abstraction?

Vital preaching from a work of literature suggests the importance of exposition, but under a new rubric. Exposition is as contemporary and as existential as the other elements of the sermon. Where it is not—where dogmatic theology is superimposed upon literature—irrelevance and remoteness are unmistakable. For example, if the preacher has read such a poem as Elizabeth Sewell's "The Land Was Theirs Before They Were the Land's," the mere reading of which is exegesis, how superfluous would it be for him to proceed to "explain" the poem in terms of theology? The moment of truth occurs in the reading of the poem, and further reflection upon it is almost necessarily in the idiom of the poem itself. The example is extreme, deliberately so in order to suggest that the theological act of exposition—far from being an "improvement" upon the piece—occurs at the place where a man meditates deeply upon his own existence. We may be sure that a man does not meditate upon his life apart from his contemporary setting.

Theology appears in Christian preaching as the distinctive shape which the preacher gives to experience, revealing his intention in addressing his contemporaries. In the exposition—which may not correspond to a block of material at all—the preacher's aim begins to appear. One becomes aware at certain points in the sermon that the preacher has taken a step back from experience, in this case literature, and that he has chosen his material for this occasion with a specific intention in mind. Exposition is that dimension of preaching which shows the preacher's intention to speak about the God and Father of Jesus

Christ. But he does not make that intention known by resorting to conventional theological language.

There is, however, a bonus for theology here. Theological language is actually clarified and refined in a non-theological setting. A sermon on contemporary literature may provide the very context in which biblical-dogmatic language is renewed. The Christian tradition is revealed as pertinent and lively where it is allowed to move into the thick of current human affairs. When we understand that the world is one and that we share the history of all our fellows, we gain perspective on the Christian tradition. That new perspective actually is given in the sermon coached by theology but phrased in a secular idiom.

A good analogy of what happens when theology stands in the wings may be seen in the current folksinging phenomenon. The folksingers have taken to such lyrics as "That's What I Like about Jesus" and "O Happy Day, When Jesus Washed My Sins Away." A theologian, to say nothing of the typical preacher, would hardly be noticed if he used such overtly Christian language. But in the new, worldly setting afforded by the guitar-strumming singer or a lusty band of television performers the familiar words come alive as profoundly religious and deeply moving.

In the worldly sermon there is opportunity for the renewal of theological language. If the preacher comes out of his theological world to meet the people of his town, he may bring with him an occasional theological word. When he has met men where they are—in anxiety, status-seeking, pride, self-doubt—then he may be able to open up the meaning of such a word as *grace*. It is, of course, not the word itself which is important. But a great deal is to be

gained, given the Judeo-Christian roots of our culture, if such a pervasive word can be salvaged. The so-called secular sermon provides a foil against which theological language can come alive. That is theology's bonus in the sermon from nonbiblical literature.

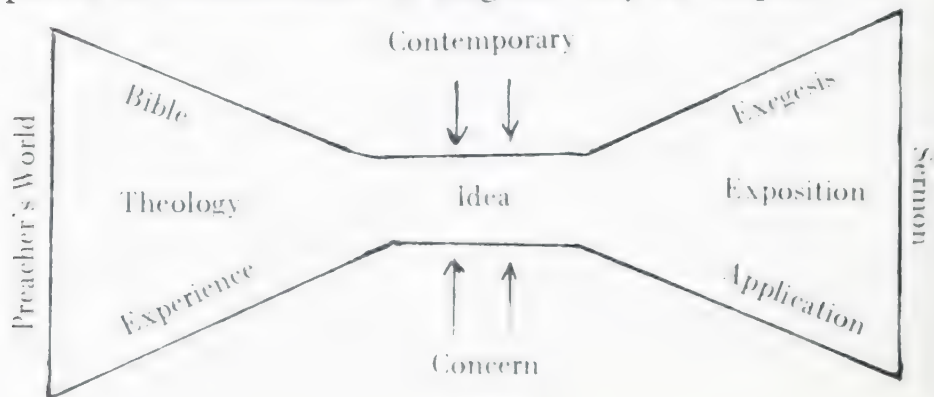
Behind all of this we see the preacher in his study, pursuing his lifelong vocation as a theological student. Whatever theology appears in the sermon will be like a granite outcropping in the New England countryside, by its bare visibility suggesting vast subterranean formations. The preacher who neglects his work as a theologian dare not attempt to preach in a secular way. He will, in the first place, fall short of the fullest interpretation of the world around him. His heritage is the Judeo-Christian tradition. If he does not enter in upon his own spiritual inheritance he can hardly hope to grasp the significance for himself or others of his present experience. In his study, he should ask the questions of exposition: Which doctrines bear upon this idea? What has the symbolic and liturgical tradition to say to this text or topic? Does the history of the church throw light upon this idea? What supplementary insight and amplification does the Bible afford? These questions, along with his reading of current books, provide the structure of the unseen but necessary work which the preacher does as a theologian in the wings.

When we commend a sermon for its exposition we mean, under our rubric, that the preacher reveals that he has reflected theologically. His meditation upon the inherited tradition may lead him to nontheological expression in the pulpit. I think we may say with some certainty that Jesus chose parabolic speech and a nonecclesiastical life-style precisely because of his intention to speak of God.

In short, the Christian exposition of a work of art may be true to the Christian tradition without the superimposition of theological language. At the same time, authentic Christian interpretation does depend upon theological reflection. We must, however, differentiate between the theological work of the preacher's study and his intention to communicate God's presence from the pulpit. Exposition, then, will appear as a pervasive and discriminating intention, by no means confined to hard and fast homiletical boundaries or susceptible to isolation from the supposed less theological parts of the sermon. There will appear, no doubt, some differentiation between what the artist says and what the preacher is saying. But that line ought never to be arbitrarily or finally drawn. Exposition is, after all, the effort of a man to relate his personal present to his equally personal past.

Application: Springing the Trap

To speak of exegesis, exposition, and application is merely to point to the variety of materials at the preacher's disposal. These resources have been sorted out by homiletics and arranged to follow one upon the other. What is crucial, however, is not whether these elements can be isolated and arranged, but their interrelationships and power to communicate. A diagram may be helpful:



The idea—the jelled experience which the preacher intends to express—selects from the preacher's "world" the materials which get into the sermon. Living in a given time and place gives rise to what we call, with some loss of vitality, contemporary concern. That concern presses in upon the preacher and refines his idea, which in turn monitors the material which he uses in the necessarily limited sermon.

Therefore, to insist that the sermon include application is no more than to ask of preaching that it be in touch with men and women here and now. But should not the entire sermon be in touch with the persons present? The answer is so obvious as to undercut all arbitrary distinctions between application and the other movements of the sermon. Application, finally, is no more existential than exegesis or exposition, both of which are, so to speak, filtered through the preacher's own subjective awareness of himself and his congregation.

The abuses of the idea of application have been many. It is often thought that the preacher discusses a subject or a text and then at the last engages the congregation. Conceived in that way, application suggests meeting quite specific needs at the end of the sermon. There is in that, of course, a measure of validity. But the preacher goes furthest astray in application when he thinks of these down-to-earth needs pragmatically. Too often the preacher feels compelled to end his sermon "relevantly" by urging the people to *do* something, as if a man's basic need were to be a maker and a master. The people who come to worship need first to receive and only then to act. That subsequent action may take many forms and have as many moods. People *need* to celebrate, to give thanks, to find relief for

anxiety, panic, and guilt, to find comfort, and to be strengthened in the will to try again.

A sermon may be applied (or better, contain what we arbitrarily designate application) simply by leading people to rejoice in God's grace or to go away thankful, to meditate on mercy, to remember with gratitude the persons who have nurtured and cared for them. Or the sermon may have a very specific aim in that it leads people to concrete, visible action.

A new rubric emerges: Contemporary literature may well be its own application. That rubric reiterates the admonition to trust story. Exposition is out of order when it implies: I have shown you a work of art; now I am going to tell you its true, that is, theological, meaning. Similarly, sermonic application does not make "practical" what would otherwise be only meditation and enlarged vision. True, it is important that in the course of the sermon the hearer should say, "He knows what it is like to be me." That is application. But to "be me" is to be human, and to be human is to be redeemable only by new sight, a compelling new story, by meditation. Who can say that a sermon has not been applied if it leads a man to meditate, trapping him into reflection upon the meaning of his life?

The application, then, may be in the story itself. Wherever it appears in the sermon, the application will almost certainly be drawn from the work of art itself. If the piece is worth treating then it contains the material of application. A most effective way of ending a sermon (application does in fact often come at the conclusion) is to hark back to the beginning, calling up again in the words and images of the artist, the concerns with which the sermon started.

The sermon may end with a prayer. This is perhaps the most effective application of all. The very attitude of prayer—shared concern—provides a place where the intention of the sermon can be realized. One acknowledges his concerns, accepts his limitations, and is released from himself so that action may come as a by-product of his praying. Throughout the sermon the preacher intends to point toward God as the one at the heart of human striving. What more appropriate application could there be than a prayer, expressing human concerns in the presence of the source of ultimate concern?

The concluding application of a sermon on nonbiblical literature might well be a hymn, or a confession of faith. There is promise in combining literature with the Communion service or the baptismal sacrament. What other dramatic actions may be dormant in the church's life, actions capable of dancing out the proclaimed word in such a way that the good news cannot be missed? Who is so dull of spirit that he cannot see that preaching ought to make us shout for joy and embrace our brothers?

In certain settings the most compelling application is a reading from the Bible. Where the Bible is known, there is often poetic power in reading a pertinent passage at the end of a nonbiblical sermon. I recall, for example, a sermon on Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, in which the drought-stricken valley symbolizes the harsh lives of the black people of South Africa. At the end of the sermon the preacher read Isaiah's great poem in which he envisions the desert transformed into a lush garden where the hills and trees themselves rejoice. Such application may depend in part upon ingrained feeling for the biblical literature, though one could hardly be completely insensitive to

Isaiah's poetry. It may be that a nonbiblical setting is just the context in which the Bible can be heard anew.

To sum up, when one preaches from literature, he becomes aware of the artificiality of the conventional distinctions among exegesis, exposition, and application. Though those categories are useful for analysis, they cannot be taken as necessary divisions within the sermon. When the preacher trusts story, he finds it redundant to require "theological" exposition and "practical" application as indispensable to preaching. Literature engages the present moment and provides insight to such a degree that there is hardly room for "telling them what you told them" under the injunction of either theology or pragmatism.

Drama Without Dramatics

At first glance one may think that to preach from literature is to be "literary," to participate in drama to be "dramatic." On the contrary, the rubric for style and delivery is drama without dramatics.

The preaching event is drama; as an event of the Christian community it is never a performance. The preacher is not one who acts but one who acts out; he dances out the tradition. In his preaching he shares a story, but not as one outside the story under the necessity of projecting himself into it as an actor. When the preacher goes to the pulpit he does not take the stage; the entire congregation is on stage with him. (That may suggest the liturgical inappropriateness of the ostentatious pulpit.) The dramatics of the actor are out of place in the sermon which voices the community's shared life. We are uncomfortable, if not scandalized, when the most subtle artificiality or the slightest nuance of affectation betrays that the man stands out-

side the message he speaks. To stand outside the message is to stand apart from the community.

Drama portrays life. The preacher lives the life he portrays, so he acts out rather than acting. When he turns to contemporary literature he finds life as he and his people know it. He brings novels, poetry, and plays to the pulpit because they have actually become part of his being. His treatment of the work of art, then, does not depend upon studied dramatics. Rather, he relies upon his own personal style to tell a story through which he has lived. In doing that he will depend upon the author's words and images, but finally he relies upon that humanity by which he has participated in a story and out of which authentic preaching springs.

By all means, let the preacher excerpt from the novel, interpret a poem with feeling, enter into the dialogue of a play. It is good to bring the book to the pulpit and to read from it, naming the author and giving proper acknowledgment. The attitude in which the preacher reads should be one of honest sharing of a meaningful experience—relaxed, open, grateful. If he communicates by this mood that what he is sharing is part of his own life, then there is the possibility of drama. The great actor does in fact identify with the play, but he remains an actor. When the preacher is what he says—when the man is the message—there is high drama indeed.

To sum up, the appropriation of literature to preaching depends upon the prior event in which the preacher has made the story his own. Further, when the story has grasped him, he must go on to try to understand it from the standpoint of the Christian community to which he ministers. Finally, however, the power of the story to move his

people depends not upon his dramatic skills—which is not to depreciate the arts of rhetoric—but upon a natural, human style and delivery. The power of preaching is in its humanity.

I recall vividly the sermons of a young preacher at a divinity school convocation. The man was a most powerful preacher for no other reason than that he was himself. He seemed sometimes to be musing in the pulpit, finding his way with this particular congregation. One had the feeling that a person in the audience would be perfectly free to stand up and begin a conversation between pulpit and pew. One morning, the preacher talked about J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, recalling how his teen-age daughter had asked for her father's copy. When he had hesitated, she rejoined that she could read the language on the walls at school, if that was what worried him. He had given her the book (with the comment that if she must learn such language she might as well learn from an artist) and had gone on to preach about the experience. All of which is to say that it is when art is really part of a man's life and when preaching is honestly human that the sermon on literature succeeds. The preacher who is himself in the pulpit—and lives as close to earth as a teen-ager's father must—is most likely to share a story with his congregation. Ironic as it seems, a conscious effort at dramatics could be the death of drama where preaching from literature is concerned.

The secondary rubric is obvious: avoid the gimmick. Anyone who innovates in preaching is likely to be thought irresponsible. The only effective answer to such a charge is an honest intention to say something to people which is important to oneself. Communication breaks down when it

appears that what is being said is not important to the preacher or that he is not really interested in saying it to people but only in saying it. Or, if he does seem intent upon communication, he may wish to communicate for a motive unworthy of what he is communicating. At whichever of these points one betrays a false intention, communication—to say nothing of communion—breaks down. In the case of literature, if the preacher's preoccupation is with the literature itself, or with his own cleverness or stylistic ability in interpreting it, the intention of preaching is subverted. Preaching is telling good news; simply because of the nature of that news gimmicks can have no place.

The cardinal rule in style is simple: the preacher should write and speak with disciplined simplicity. The word for which one looks in preaching is not *le mot juste* but the redeeming word. That word is the one which lets people know that the man who speaks to them of God is a man like themselves. The style appropriate to the gospel is straightforward, earthy. Drama is at that place—whether in the Gospels, in a contemporary novel, in the pulpit—where a man sees his own life moving before him. Redeeming drama occurs when a man like ourselves speaks of God. It is as if the preacher projected upon the chancel wall a play in which all the congregation participated, and then, in the midst of the drama, spoke of God. It was no small thing when Jesus at the last spoke of his Father. Nor is it a small thing when a man today reveals himself and speaks of God.

The same rule applies to the delivery of the sermon: let a man be himself. One's theology will show itself in delivery. (It may be that "delivery" is an unfortunate word,

suggesting oratory and the "giving of sermons.") The best speech for the pulpit is animated conversation, the way one speaks when he talks with friends about what concerns him. If the preacher is anxious about his performance he reveals that he does not understand his place as a servant of the Word and of the whole community. The most effective speech is that which does not call attention to itself but to its object. Let the preacher speak as one man who has heard from the artist something which has bearing upon the community's life. The possibility of the Word of God is not in the cocky arrogance or self-assured posturing of Chanticleer:

Do not forget, Lord,
it is I who make the sun rise.
I am Your servant
but, with the dignity of my calling,
I need some glitter and ostentation.
Noblesse oblige.
All the same,
I am Your servant,
only do not forget, Lord,
I make the sun rise.⁵¹

It is the man on whom the sun has come up, and who heralds its rising so as to wake other people to rejoice in the light, who serves the Word. There is the greatest difference between crowing and celebrating.

All of this is to suggest that the preacher, in Farmer's classic phrase, is the servant of the Word.⁵² His intention determines whether what he does in the pulpit is gospel or gimmick. Whatever materials he brings to the sermon,

⁵¹ From "The Prayer of the Cock" in *Prayers from the Ark* by Carmen Bernos de Gasztold, translated by Rumer Godden. Copyright © 1962 by Rumer Godden. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc.

⁵² Cf. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word*.

whether Bible or contemporary literature, will produce only a vague feeling of unreality unless they are phrased and spoken by an honest man speaking out of a story which has become his own.

Technique and Tips

(a) *The Sermon Book*. The preacher who moves in the world of literature, theater, and cinema is bombarded with new ideas. He needs a system for seizing an idea when it comes to him, allowing it to germinate, and finally for harvesting the accumulated material. The author has tried complicated systems of filing only to find them time-consuming and quickly out of date. By far the most effective method I know is the sermon book kept in company with marked books.

Dr. Robert McCracken taught his students at Union Theological Seminary to use the sermon book, a simple spiral binder divided into three sections. One section is for texts, one for topics, and one for personal experiences which may serve as illustration. For each text and topic one allows two pages, as the book lies open. Illustrative material is kept in the third section, in paragraph form with brief marginal indexing.

The preacher lives with the sermon book, putting his ideas into it while they are fresh. It may be that the idea will be written first on a *Playbill* or a shopping bag, or perhaps in a book's margin. At the very moment when the idea comes to him, the preacher should write down in telegraphic style all the cascading impressions and associations which inevitably accompany a significant insight. Either at the time or by transfer later, that material should be written into the sermon book. The preacher should take

care to include detail sufficient for recollection. If the insight is closely associated with a specific text, whether in the Bible or in a book of poetry, the text and the idea are written at the top of the left-hand page. In recording accompanying material, I have found it helpful to number in order the references to books, past experiences, hymns, biblical passages, people, and so forth. From time to time the preacher should read through the sermon book, adding to the accumulating notations under the various texts and topics. In this way, his ideas grow until he is ready to harvest the material for a specific occasion.

This method is especially useful to the man who preaches from contemporary literature. The sermon book can be kept close at hand when he is reading, ready to seize the idea when it comes. Notations referring to pages in a given volume will appear in the sermon book under various texts and topics.

A word of warning, however. The sermon book should be close at hand but not too close. There is no need to repeat at this point all that has been said about meeting the story as a person rather than as a preacher. It should be emphasized again that homiletical technique can become to the unwary a preoccupation which prevents real participation in fiction, poetry, and drama.

When that has been said, however, the sermon book may be recommended as a practical means of keeping and cultivating ideas. Dr. McCracken filled one book each year. During his summer vacation he harvested texts and topics for the coming church year, sketching outlines and titles. Back in New York in September, he was prepared for a new term of preaching and, at the same time, starting a new sermon book.

The sermon book is all the more valuable if the preacher keeps it alongside shelves of well-marked books. The paperback is a boon to the preacher; he can have in sight the books which furnish his imagination. Each book may have at the back an index which is especially meaningful to him. Marginal notations and underscoring increase the value of the book to the preacher. The appearance of a book after one has read it reflects to what degree it has become part of his world of thought.

The preacher will meet many works of art which cannot be placed on his bookshelves: movies, plays, and (though they are outside the scope of this book) music, painting, and sculpture. His immediate impressions should be verbalized in the sermon book. I find myself coming home from the movies and sitting down to write in the book before retiring. This material usually appears in the section on texts, but the distinction between text and topic is somewhat arbitrary.

When it comes to actually writing the sermon, open the sermon book and take a legal-size writing pad, one of the big yellow ones. When the idea is clearly phrased and written at the top of the page, proceed to write an outline, utilizing the sermon book's material by referring to the numbers which appear by each entry. The making of the outline sometimes alters the idea, refining it. When the outline matches the idea, containing neither more or less than the other, the sermon can be written. If one finds, as sometimes happens, that the outline will not come clearly, he should begin to write. In the writing, order may emerge. Occasionally, in the writing both idea and outline change. At the end of writing, the idea should be crystal clear, so

that if the preacher were asked he could put in one sentence the sermon's content.

(*b*) *Bowdlerizing and Plagiarizing*. Some works of art are not the same if their language is expurgated; Holden Caulfield without four-letter words is not Holden Caulfield. But the churches, however much they need Holden Caulfield, are not ready to take him straight. The preacher simply has to realize that he is speaking in the presence of children, inevitably conservative older persons, and in a setting from which convention has long excluded indelicacy. Though one's own aesthetic sense may be offended by expedient omission, that is the price, at present, of introducing such writers as Updike and Salinger to the pulpit. The preacher has simply to judge the maturity of his congregation, to take into account the particular occasion, and then to omit whatever would be more alienating than helpful.

As for plagiarism, to my knowledge no preacher has ever been indicted for reading works of literature in the context of a sermon. It is conceivable that such a charge could be lodged, if preaching were placed in the same category as public readings and theatrical performances. In that unlikely eventuality the question would simply have to be faced. We may for the present assume that artists do not object to the reading of excerpts from their works by a man sensitive to artistic expression and intent not upon turning a profit but communicating the gospel. Plagiarism is first a state of mind. Properly motivated and sincerely appreciative of the artist's work, the preacher is not likely to be charged with appropriating another man's labor to selfish interests.

(c) *Directness and Indirection*. There is among Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings* the advice that upon coming to a door one should not stand at the keyhole; he should either break in or pass on by. In making sermons, a man should simply break in. *How* to break in is a lesson the preacher can learn from the artist, who depends upon concrete detail, nameable people, vivid impressions. He comes quickly to the point by telling a story, and the elements of story are always concrete. The preacher ought, in that sense, to "break in."

Preachers have a way of never quite saying what they intend to say. My students in preaching are given to generalizing and qualifying; their sermons are consequently elusive and opaque. Asked in a laboratory session following his sermon to tell the class briefly what he was trying to say, the student invariably puts his idea across more simply and clearly. When treating literature, especially, one should go straight to the story; the story says what he wishes to say. Having broken in, he should avoid the temptation to substitute abstract categories for concrete detail and visual imagery. In brief, let the preacher get to the heart of the matter; and then let him stay in the world which people see, hear, taste, smell, and feel.

Paradoxically, the directness and concreteness of story are the makings of indirect discourse. Story depends upon the familiar to point beyond itself. In this sense, materialism contains the possibility of transcendence. For example, the preacher may say a great deal about grace, hardly using the word, if he will show us Mama Younger (*A Raisin in the Sun*), gray-haired and dreaming of a house with a little garden, as she puts into her son's hands all the money

she has in the world. The preacher's temptation is to read that story and then to talk about it in terms of "love," "sacrifice," and "trust." In trying to go directly to the "theological" point, the preacher loses the power of indirection which relies upon the everyday and the familiar. As Browning knew, the blunt truth becomes untruth. By way of the very different bluntness of sensual imagery people come to see for themselves. Rudimentary to preaching, especially from literature, are concreteness *and* indirection.

(d) *Parables*. The preacher may want to expand vignettes from his everyday experience into suggestive stories. These parables may serve as the basis for an entire sermon or they may be included in the exposition of a biblical or literary passage. When insight comes in connection with a concrete image or dramatic action, the preacher ought not to miss the opportunity to fashion a story. Let him, as soon as possible after the moment of insight, sit down to describe and expand what he has seen and felt. He should take care not to parade in public what is too personal. But, on the other hand, there is something quite inappropriate to the nature of his vocation in the preacher's apologizing for a "personal reference." The meaningful events of his life ought to appear in his sermons as parables of his own imaginative making.

(e) *Finally*. Fully as important as breaking in is breaking out. A preacher can steal his thunder by laboring over what he is "trying" to say; he can also rumble too long after the bolt has struck. Story simply stops. The typical sermon goes on, filling time long after the time has been fulfilled. Too often this penchant for pressing on is due to a feeling of obligation, either to satisfy the clock or to urge the people to action. In some quarters, it is felt that

every sermon should end with an evangelistic appeal, much to the deprivation of the faithful congregation. When the moment of insight has come, when the people have been moved, stop talking. When the Word has happened there is nothing to do but to enter into it, to share it, in prayer, in song, or in quietly being together.

Sermons

IT IS WITH SOME RESERVATION that these sermons are included. Preaching is spoken. It occurs as an actual event of worship. To represent in print what happens in a sermon is no more possible than to capture vivid experience in a snapshot. What happens when one man—part of a worshipping congregation—speaks to other men in the context of liturgical drama, hymns, and prayer, can hardly recur on the printed page. As I have read these sermons in print, while recalling the occasions on which they were preached, I have come to understand why at least two of my teachers have declined to have their sermons published.

Nevertheless, the sermons, all of which have been preached in churches or college chapels, appear here as examples of the foregoing theory. It is hoped that they will serve not as patterns for sermons, but to suggest how one man has gone about preaching from literature. No doubt another preacher approaching the same works of art, if he chose those works at all, would proceed quite differently as his personal style and the occasion dictated.

The sermons treat various art forms: drama, poetry, the novel, and cinema. All except the fourth are based directly on a specific work. The doctrinal sermon is more complex: in treating the doctrine of the second coming it combines the eschatological motifs to be found in Revelation, a novel, and an original parable.

"A RAISIN IN THE SUN"

Lesson: Matthew 5:38-48

If you live in a three-room apartment in South Chicago you may live on dreams or not at all.

Mama Younger has dreamed all her life of a little suburban house with a garden plot.

But for the moment the best she can do is tend a spindly plant on the windowsill, a geranium or something of the sort which, as she says, "expresses me."

Beneatha, Mama's daughter, doesn't like her name.

Her dream is more like a vengeance; she is going to be a doctor, make something of herself, and break out of the ghetto.

Walter Lee's dream is the insistent malaise of a chauffeur who opens car doors all day long,

a man with a pregnant wife who irons other people's clothes,

a son who feels hang-dog about asking for fifty cents for school,

and a mother who has scrubbed floors all her life and still has to stand in line for the bathroom down the hall.

The Younger family's dreams, it seems, are about to come true.

A check for \$10,000 from the insurance company comes in the morning mail.

Mama, remembering her husband, dreams of a house.

Beneatha's mind is on medical school, and Walter Lee is beside himself at the prospect of a get-rich-quick business deal.

Mama goes out one afternoon, while her children are at work, and makes a down-payment on a house.

It is just a small place, but they will have their own bathroom, and a garden.

That evening, she tells Walter Lee:

"It makes a big difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to him."⁵³

But the young man shouts something about butchered dreams and storms out of the house.

So Mama sits alone, thinking about the money and the house and her children.

Then she sees what it is that Walter needs, what his *real* dream is.

That night, as Walter sits at the kitchen table listening to a sax playing the blues, Mama puts some papers in front of him.

"Listen to me now. I say I been wrong, Son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world been doing to you. Walter—what you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing as precious to me. . . . There ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing

⁵³ Lorraine Hansberry, "*A Raisin in the Sun*," in *Six American Plays for Today*, ed. Bennett Cerf (New York: Modern Library, 1961), p. 361. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

else—if it means—if it means it's going to destroy my boy."

She gives him \$6,500, half of it for his sister's medical studies and half of it to use as he will.

"For you to decide. . . . It ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting it in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be."

"You trust me like that, Mama?"

"I ain't never stopped trusting you. Like I ain't never stopped loving you."⁵⁴

As it turns out, Walter Lee is taken in and loses the money, all of it in one day.

It is hard for Mama; she remembers her husband, how he used to come home from work with the red showing in his eyes and the veins moving in his head.

But she remembers, too, what Walter needs—

not to own a house,

or to strike it rich,

but something more elusive, less tangible.

We too are trying to understand Walter Lee.

Just what do young black men and women want?

They have sat down, stood in, marched, commandeered buildings, looted and burned, defied police, and died—all for goals which we only vaguely understand.

We are most confused when the young black is not content with his newly won place in society, when he demands black-study programs, black dormitories, attention to himself *as* black.

What *is* he dreaming of?

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

The question is hard to answer.

The black himself can hardly say what he wants.

How does a man, after all, articulate his need to belong, to feel worthwhile and free?

What is clear is that the black wants much more than a new house in suburbia.

His dream is much more like Walter Lee's, to be his own man, to be free.

We use the word often in this country—*freedom*.

Unfortunately, we tend to emphasize the freedom to have, rather than to be.

And so the battle hymns of the civil rights movement are "freedom songs."

When the black man marches he is not marching *merely* for a new car and a house in suburbia.

The craze for those things is only symptomatic of a deeper craving.

The black does not feel free simply because he has a larger piece of the economic pie.

There is little joy in a new house in a suburb where the "neighbors" don't want him.

What is worse, *in himself* he does not feel at home in his own country.

What he needs is his manhood, the freedom to be himself, to say "black is beautiful," believing it himself and finding some reinforcement of that self-image in the country which is his by birthright.

Mama Younger came to understand her son's suffering, to see beneath his mad materialism that insecurity and humiliation which wants the status-symbol precisely because a man does not feel at home in the world.

Walter Lee's agony was doing work which society itself defined as insignificant—

dressing up in a uniform and being called "boy."

Mama saw that even in buying a house for him she was calling him "boy," refusing to let him take his life in his own hands.

Once she understood, she determined, at whatever risk, to show Walter Lee what she thought of him.

Surely we can understand Walter Lee as Mama does.

Christians should know that it is the gracious act, utterly surprising, which is redeeming.

Unexpected, uncalculating, as heedless of risk as passion—grace breaks the circle of self-concern and self-justification.

That is not wishful thinking.

That *is* our faith.

God, as Jesus reveals him, meets us as a surprise.

His acts are like the brown paper package which comes on a Tuesday in mid-March, just another day,
no red-letter day on the calendar.

Opening the package with puzzlement, "Must be late Christmas or mistaken birthday," we find the note inside:
"Thinking of you."

The only occasion is life shared, the only motive the wish to share it more fully.

With God there is no place for deserving the gift, or earning it, or repaying it.

In his economy there are no self-made men, no balancing the scales, only the surprise of grace.

As Israel's greatest poet put it:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord."

God's way with a man sets him free from self-doubt and fear, from feelings of inferiority and self-defeating anxiety.

God lets us know what he thinks of us.

He makes us our own man by making us his own.

The only word for that is *grace*.

That is just what Mama does for her son.

We may be sure that there are a great many men like Walter Lee Younger who need that special treatment, that unheard-of generosity.

The question is: Can we Americans, born and bred to earn the very right to be alive, respond with grace?

Our ways are not, after all, God's ways.

Why, we are unable to be gracious with ourselves.

How shall we meet our would-be brother with unprecedented surprise?

A poem introduces the published play:

"What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?"⁵⁵

⁵⁵ "Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes. Copyright 1951 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted from *The Panther and the Lash*, by Langston Hughes, by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Their dreams deferred, many black Americans have indeed dried up like a raisin in the sun, or sugared over like a syrupy sweet, or just sagged like a heavy load.

And more recently, dreams deferred, swelled by rising expectations, have exploded in American cities and colleges.

In his book, *The Absurd Healer*, Matthew Dumont helps us to see the black American as a man with a special history and special needs.

The only way to avoid an explosion, says the doctor, is to meet needy men with actions so generous as to seem absurd by our outworn standards of hardfisted economic coercion.

"We should be constructing a society for the urban poor of such beauty and richness, with so many options for behavior, that it becomes nothing less than a privilege to be called poor."⁵⁶

Some would say that Dumont's book is well named "absurd."

Are we to be driven by the threat of explosion to give special treatment to the blacks?

It may come to that; in fact, we may be at that point now—running scared.

The Christian, at his best, does not move under the threat but at the impetus of grace.

In the light of that lovingkindness in which he has been accepted and kept, in which he is nurtured daily, the Christian is called and enabled to pay undivided attention to people who are hurting.

⁵⁶ Matthew Dumont, *The Absurd Healer* (New York: Science House, 1968), p. 80.

What could be more Christian than letting people know that we value them—their unique history, their style of life, their dreams?

What could be more Christian than telling people, in words and significant action, that they are more important to us than property or safety?

Somehow our society must say to its minority groups, indeed, to us all: We value you, we need you, we trust you.

Unless we communicate that, all our liberal talk and even our redistribution of wealth are little more to Walter Lee than Mama's house.

In the end, Walter Lee loses the money but finds himself. Mama thinks it a small price to pay.

Having seen her son come into his manhood that very day, she follows the movers out of the empty apartment.

But she remembers something and goes back.

She comes out carrying the spindly plant which she has watered and pampered and turned so often to the sun as if it were the last geranium in the world.

But I suppose, after all, that is what a geranium on a sooty windowsill in Chicago needs.

PRAYER: *Father God, as you know us, causing your sun to shine on us all, and as you know me, numbering the hairs of my head, put your grace in my heart that I may meet my brother with that grace which will surprise him into hope, joy, and peace. Amen.*

"FROM THE SIXTEENTH FLOOR"

A SERMON BASED ON THE POEM BY RICHARD SELIG

Lessons: Psalm 127; Luke 19:29-42

"Pardoning this borough for its evil,
I look past the tops of buildings, to where
The sky is. Remembering that man's malice,
This man's fate; the former's cunning,
The latter's jeopardy—seeing the sky,
Placid in spite of soot and heartache,
I am reminded to pray. Redemption,
Like our janitor, comes as we go home:
A stooped man turning out the lights."⁵⁷

It is hard to see a city from its streets.

Perhaps you have to get up above it, say to the sixteenth floor.

There is the city at your feet, the throb of its business a steady roar,

its mingled joy and pain appearing as one organism,
streets alive with the intertwined lives of persons
who are no more than dots in motion.

From that height it is hard to sort out the hospital from the office building.

But imagination, the more conscious of persons for being at a distance, dwells on one man's malice, another man's fate,

the man in a hospital gown,
and another, briskly striding, in a starched white

⁵⁷ Richard Selig, in *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), p. 610. First published in Richard Selig, *Poems*, The Dolmen Press, Dublin, 1962, distributed in the United States by Dufour Editions. Reprinted by permission.

shirt, one anesthetized against his jeopardy,
the other vigorous in his cunning.

But that is the city, the place of "business is business"
and business as usual, and the place where people die as
surely as they go home from work at the end of the day.

You can see a city whole from the sixteenth floor, and
seeing it you may fall to despair,
or to not caring.

But from an eyrie you can also see the sky:

"I look past the tops of buildings to where
The sky is.

.

Placid in spite of soot and heartache."

You can live in a place like New York and see that
bluest of skies as seldom as you see the faces around you,
lost in endlessly fascinating canyons,
heartache obscured by well-furnished windows and
well-planned faces,
the sky unnecessary and soot-shrouded.

But from the sixteenth floor, you can see the sky.

Up there, in view of the placid blue, you may be able,
even while looking down on malice and fate,
cunning and jeopardy,
to pardon this borough for its evil, to forgive and accept,
and that is something very different from not caring.

You don't pardon out of hand what you see from the
sixteenth floor.

The city at your feet is not at all like the office at your
back,

this efficient place which unseen people ready every
night for your daily manipulation.

Out in the city, unlike the office, you can't even clear the air of soot, to say nothing of heartache, by pushing buttons and sending memoranda.

Standing above the city you come to see that the life which threads its streets and moves behind blank windows is out of your control.

And so you are reminded to pray, and in praying to live with the city's malice and pain without resignation.

From the sixteenth floor, a man sees both the city and the sky, and he is likely to feel humble and hopeful, to come to compassion for the dying as well as the cunning.

We are on the sixteenth floor.

We can only imagine how the earth appears to the astronaut—

his sense of the world in its wholeness,
a small blue ball floating in space with three billion people aboard.

Seeing earth from 50,000 miles out has given us a new feeling for the human community.

From out there the geographical boundaries and ancient rivalries of man seem petty indeed.

From space, the earth returns to the appearance of creation: one earth for all of God's children.

In such a world, the law of survival is not nature red in tooth and claw—any more than it is the city's competition and individualism—but compassion and cooperation.

But how shall that become clear to us, as clear as the sky?

The times are upon us, clearing our vision, getting us up to heights where we can see.

The theologian would say that the time is eschatological.

Crisis presses us to think about the *meaning* of our life together.

People in the city are hurting—
hurting each other,
hurting themselves by hurting one another,
just hurting.

Increased visibility and enforced proximity will not let us escape the questions: Who is my neighbor? Why do I feel so uncomfortable in the elevator with these people who live in the same building with me? What is a community?

T. S. Eliot's *Stranger* puts the question:

" 'What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?'

What will you answer? 'We all dwell together
To make money from each other'? or 'This is a community'?

And the *Stranger* will depart and return to the desert.
O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the
Stranger,

Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions."⁵⁸

We know the answer to the question.

Knowing it, how shall we "pardon this borough for its evil"?

Only if we know what Richard Selig knows: the redemption of the city is not finally in our hands.

The lesson is late, but we are learning that human community is a creation of the spirit.

⁵⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1963), p. 103. Reprinted by permission.

Our technology has reared skyscrapers,
our science has produced enough food for all the
people,
our genius has made man mobile, as free as the jet
and the automobile.

But we live in jeopardy,
next door to hunger,
in cities where we cannot walk in the parks,
choking on our own wastes.

Technology, research, efficiency—the hallmarks of our
society—will certainly play their part in rebuilding the
city which they have built.

But they cannot redeem the city.

As the air becomes more choked, the fact becomes more
clear that our salvation lies in the recovery of faith and
humanity.

However much we dislike the overused word, the city's
problem is "spiritual."

Or as the poet puts it, there is hope of salvation in the
man who leaves his business, the engineering of the town,
to look out over the city,

to *feel* for it,

and then to be reminded to pray.

"... Redemption,

Like our janitor, comes when we go home."

Let us, so to speak, come down to earth.

What does it mean to say that the redemption of the
city comes after we have closed up shop, that salvation
arrives after we have done all that we can do?

Take a specific problem, the pollution and ravaging of
man's environment—air, water, countryside.

The very face of the land—like a man's countenance which with passing years reveals his affections—reflects the soul of a people.

The soot which blankets our cities,

the ugliness which litters our avenues and highways,
our thickening rivers,

the glut of murderous automobiles belching the
poison of irresponsible individualism at its worst:
our soul is laid bare by what we are doing to the land.

Having gained the world and lost our soul, we are losing the world.

The ecological crisis reveals our spiritual poverty, the price of materialism.

To our madness for wealth, novelty, and power, even the air we breathe and the water which is life itself can be sacrificed.

As St. Augustine knew, when men cease to love best the City of God, the city of man becomes a slum.

Looking out upon the city which we have built, we see our souls.

We need not, however, dwell on soot and sewage.

We could speak of the ignored elderly, unwanted by their busy families and written off as a loss by a glamorous, high-living society;

the scorned poor, an affront to our self-image;

the neglected sick, who can't pay their own way and embarrass a society built around the myth of the self-made man.

They are all part of the landscape of a city where economic success and personal fulfillment are equated, where power is supremely valued and ultimately trusted.

That landscape is a jungle, where people prey upon each other.

All right, so we are up on the sixteenth floor.

We've seen the city, and ourselves.

So what do we *do*?

That is the first question an American would ask.

The point of this sermon is, however, that the first movement of the faithful man is not action but prayer.

Praying is getting up on the sixteenth floor where we can see the city and feel for it.

Before we do anything, or after we have done all we can—as you like—we are called to pray, remembering that redemption comes after we go home.

For it is God who put us here together, who can put it in our hearts to love each other.

"What life have you if you have not life together?

There is no life that is not in community,

And no community not lived in praise of God.

.

We build in vain unless the Lord build with us.

Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with
you?

.

Where there is no temple there shall be no homes."⁵⁹

The words sound quaint, but they are no less true.

Our redemption draws near when we trust only in the God of love.

The compounding crises of our time, even as they spur us to action, remind us to pray.

⁵⁹ Eliot, pp. 101-3.

When you get up on the sixteenth floor, and see our city clearly, you are moved not to send memos or push buttons, but to pray.

Though we are God's servants in saving the city—called to bend our energies to build houses,

harness energy,

control population,

to push buttons, send memos, and man laboratories—
from the sixteenth floor it is clear that

“ . . . Redemption,

Like our janitor, comes as we go home:

A stooped man turning out the lights.”

The gospel tells the story of Jesus' coming to Jerusalem riding upon a lowly donkey.

“And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, ‘Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.’” (Luke 19:41-42)

Not long after that, he carried a cross to the hilltop outside Jerusalem.

Nailed up there, he had a good view of the city.

HYMN: *“Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life”*

HERZOG: CONSIDER THE LILIES

A SERMON BASED ON THE NOVEL BY SAUL BELLOW

Lesson: Matthew 6:24-34

We meet Professor Moses Herzog in a haberdasher's shop.

The man he sizes up in the mirror is not easy to describe
— middle-aged, but lean,
brooding but boyish.

A professor of history, he has published a book, and another is in his head.

But what is most on his mind is that his wife has left him.

As a matter of fact, what the professor knows—and that is a great deal—seems to have little to do with his life.

And his Jewish religion seems as useless as his Ph.D., as anachronistic as his name.

And so he goes striding from one men's store to another.

Decked out at last by a Fifth Avenue shop, he cuts a fine figure:

Professor Moses Herzog in flared pants,
striped blazer,
and yellow straw hat with a peppermint band.

He stands there in his new summer clothes, thinking to himself:

"Consider the lilies of the field"

We might expect to meet such a man on a shopping spree,

contriving gaiety and abandon,
 looking in shop windows for what he cannot possibly find there.

Moses avoids his reflected image:

"Dressed in Italian pants, furled at the bottom, and a blazer with slender lapels, red and white, he avoided full exposure in the triple lighted mirror. His body seemed unaffected by his troubles, survived all blasts. It was his face that was devastated, especially about the eyes, so that it made him pale to see himself."⁶⁰

The salesman sees an aging man buying clothes too young for him.

But then other people see Herzog only as a professor who is writing a book.

The man, however, eludes the mirror, and what he is can hardly be described by a title.

What he needs is not to be bought in all of New York, let alone in a haberdasher's shop.

He stands there, gaily dressed, thinking:

"Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed"

This man in the striped blazer is not to be taken lightly. His problem is *not* superficiality.

He has, for example, set out to change the world by endless letter writing:

to his wife and friends,
 colleagues,
 the President,
 Adlai Stevenson.

⁶⁰ Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 20. Copyright © 1961, 1963, 1964 by Saul Bellow. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc.

Personal frustration rises in a torrent of activity, a rush of epistles.

Unable to cope with his own life, he takes on the world. He is, as he says, "in frightful earnest."

Ramona sees his earnestness as symptomatic of his problem.

"She told Herzog that he was a better man than he knew—a deep man, beautiful (he could not help wincing when she said this), but sad, unable to take what his heart really desired, a man tempted by God, longing for grace, but escaping headlong from his salvation, often close at hand."⁶¹

Herzog holds back from that moment when a man gives himself up to being accepted and loved;

that experience which is so like the overwhelming self-abandon of sex.

Uneasy and out of control at the heart of his life, Herzog projects himself as a man in command.

Public image stands in for personal joy,
status for grace.

Sono, the Japanese girl, loves him in the frightening generosity of the Japanese way.

Herzog cannot bear it:

*"To tell the truth, I never had it so good But I lacked the strength of character to bear such joy. That was hardly a joke. When a man's breast feels like a cage from which all the dark birds have flown—he is free, he is light. And he longs to have his vultures back again. He wants his customary struggles, his nameless, empty works, his anger, his afflictions and his sins."*⁶²

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Sono's simple joy is as foreign, and as threatening, to Herzog as those religions of the East which would make a man's every movement a return to himself, to communion with man, nature, God.

Like a Carthaginian professor before him,
and like Bellow's Eugene Henderson,⁶³

Herzog goes on striving for what can come only when striving stops.

Henderson, for example, had to travel to Africa, away from his many business interests, to meet primitive people and to live in the company of animals, before he found life as a gift waiting to be accepted.

Augustine, after a frantic search—learning, travel, self-indulgence—found grace, the knowledge that what he had sought in distraction was all the while very near to him.

Moses Herzog is our true contemporary:

a positivist longing for poetry,
a man of deep feeling afraid to enter into human
communion,

an activist whose inner world is a shambles,
a religious man alienated from childhood faith.

He asks our questions.

What is meaningful knowledge?

What is it to live with people, in communion with
them, ourselves, and nature?

What activity is appropriate to human being, and from
what source does it well?

⁶³ See Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Viking Press, 1968).

Technology, by whose stellar success we are not a little intimidated, has shaped our answers to what are actually religious questions.

We have assumed, if tacitly, that meaningful knowledge is that which enables us to manipulate our environment:

to build cars and airplanes,
to kill insects and make fertilizer,
to prolong life,
to spur the economy to new heights.

Truth is what works, what produces.

As Herzog muses:

"This generation thinks—and this is its thought of thoughts—that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile, can be durable or have any true power. Death waits for these things as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb. . . . There is only practicality."⁶⁴

That point of view, appearing as scientism (as opposed to science) and positivism, has led to our present ecological and spiritual crisis:

the abrogation by scientific genius of its proper function in humanizing the environment;

the reduction of human experience to manipulation and acquisition;

the relegation of religion and art to irrelevance.

Having lost our soul, we are losing the world.

The very landscape of that world bares our soul.

Small wonder that a Jewish professor on a religious quest has captured our imagination.

Many among us are as alienated as Herzog from the religious establishment.

⁶⁴ Bellow, *Herzog*, p. 290.

At the same time, we are no less religious in the sense of what Paul Tillich called "ultimate concern."

Not long ago, I spent a summer at a major university which we would call quite secular: there are no religious services on the campus and religion is not among the courses listed in the catalogue.

I went to several faculty parties, where people are prone to talk freely.

I was introduced as an academic rather than patronized as a clergyman.

Some honest talk was possible.

What struck me was that most of these professors were keenly interested in religion and badly disillusioned with the churches.

There was a kind of bittersweet quality about our conversations, a combination of attraction and repulsion.

These teachers of sociology, anthropology, history, and English, seemed to feel deeply about the very things which the church celebrates and for which it prays on Sunday.

In fact, they felt so deeply, or so it seemed to me, that they were unwilling to use the traditional, glib jargon.

For the most part, they worked in their gardens, read novels, and hiked in the mountains on Sunday morning.

The reasons for their chucking the church were various.

To be sure, some had a naive understanding of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, views which had not advanced beyond Sunday school in some provincial town, the sort of religion which is as cramped and joyless as the airless basement rooms in which many of us learned what nice people don't do and too little about the positive content of faith.

Many of those Ph.D.s were blocked by unreconstructed childhood experience.

Some were put off by the churches' fixation on the institution itself, by the draining off of wealth and human energy which could effect social reform.

There were those alienated by dogmatism, by the pat, simpleminded answers with which preaching has come to be synonymous.

And on the list might go.

You can surely meet Moses Herzog at almost any academic party.

He is the man who has lost something—perhaps something that had to be lost, something he has not replaced.

Herzog does break through, if ever so tentatively.

His plans and projects yield to the tidal realities of his life.

He enters into communion:

"In the mild end of the afternoon, later, at the water-side in Woods Hole, waiting for the ferry, he looked through the green darkness at the net of bright reflections on the bottom. He loved to think about the power of the sun, about light, about the ocean. The purity of the air moved him. There was no stain in the water, where schools of minnows swam. Herzog sighed and said to himself, 'Praise God—praise God.'"⁶⁵

He keeps that happiness, as such a man is apt to do, to himself, but not altogether.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

He finds a new communion with people:

"'Luckily for me, I didn't have the means to get too far away from our common life. I am glad of that. I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not destroy my remaining years' Herzog felt a deep, dizzy eagerness to *begin*."⁶⁶

Herzog comes to grace, to that feeling of belonging to other people, to the good earth, to God.

History is not, after all, the history of mere practicality, but "the history of loving hearts."⁶⁷

A man can come to think of himself as primarily a doer, forgetting that he is a child of God who receives his life as a gift.

Especially if we have been hurt at the level where we really live—as people who need to love and be loved—we may come to think of ourselves as makers and masters rather than as creatures who must *receive* love and truth and meaning before we can do anything at all.

Moses Herzog learns how to receive, and only then to speak and act,

and then always to speak and act with reverence.

To some he may be Professor Herzog, but he knows, at last, that his real name is Moses, and that he cannot organize his world as he outlines his lectures.

Life is more like lilies, splendid for being fragile.

He comes to see that life cannot be mastered, at least not before it has been accepted.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

He learns the meaning of grace:

that life,

people,

the earth,

come to us as gifts from God.

And he is moved.

*"But I have no arguments to make about it. 'Thou movest me.' 'But what do you want, Herzog?' But that's just it—not a solitary thing."*⁶⁸

As the story closes, Moses, in his work clothes, is stretched out on the couch, watching the sun set, waiting for Ramona.

He has picked day lilies for the dinner table.

He listens to the housekeeper's broom, scratching steadily.

He thinks that he should tell Mrs. Tuttle to damp it down, not to raise so much dust.

But not just yet.

For the moment, he has no messages for anyone.

Not a single word.

PRAYER: *O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength; by the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*—From the Book of Common Prayer, 1789

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

THE FIRST AND THE LAST

Lessons: Psalm 90; Revelation 1:7-11, 21:1-6

We meet the Compsons during Holy Week.

Their story unfolds against a backdrop of suffering and death.

But perhaps we should not speak of their *story*, for these people do not move through time as story does.

They are suspended in meaninglessness; unable to fulfill the time, they try either to fill it up or to escape.

Quentin Compson, frustrated by forbidden incestuous longing, tears the hands from the clock and jumps to his death in the Charles River.

Jason, who measures time by money hoarded, has no compassionate time for anyone, and in the end has neither money nor love.

Young Miss Quentin, with no one to help make sense of her past, finds each day as aimless as it is frantic with passion.

We know them all:

Quentin who sees his life merely passing, going nowhere.

Jason, who tries to number his days by his bankbook, to give substance to life by acquisition.

Miss Quentin, drifting in lonely fantasy.

It seems that Benjy, the feeble-minded one, is the most fortunate: better to have no sense of time than a life which is no more than one petty thing after another.

But what is the alternative?

How do we make sense of the passing of our days?

Can we fulfill time rather than merely filling it up?

Does the church make any sense at all when, hard up against the question, it affirms the second coming of Jesus Christ?

William Faulkner's answer is elusive, and we cannot know it until we have met Dilsey.

The novel, moving toward that meeting, is well named: it is just when life seems, as it does in the Compson household, a tale told by an idiot, that we are most open to visions of the Lord coming again among his people.

In short,

John on Patmos,

a young man alone in a big city,

Dilsey in the Compson kitchen—

they are at the place for speaking to the Compsons and to us about the advent of the Lord.

John of Patmos scanned the clouds, and understandably so.

Jerusalem lay plundered,

Rome was a-building,

and John was stranded on the very island from which the Caesars quarried stone for their eternal city on the Tiber.

But John did not languish, nor did he wring his hands over what the world was coming to.

In his past, and present, was an event which would not allow him to take the measure of the world by Rome's impressive blocks of stone.

"He laid his right hand upon me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, the living one; I died, and

behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades.' " (Rev. 1:18)

John was as sure of the Omega as of the Alpha.

The Revelation of John is testimony to that faith, as dauntless as it is difficult to articulate, the faith of all those who in mourning over the world have waited for God's comfort.

For John it was the clouds and a new Jerusalem.

Paul had waited till the trumpet should sound and the Lord descend.

Hebrews has it simply "Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever."

But however it is put, it is the faith we share with John of Patmos, we who amid the very beauty of the autumn countryside remember that we, with our earthly city, are passing away.

We are likely listening for no trumpet.

The sound of one would conjure up Civil Defense, not Gabriel.

Nor do we turn our radar on the clouds in anticipation of a *friend*.

But we understand what John means.

Let us, therefore, celebrate our common faith in God's triumph.

John says that he shares three things with us:

"I John your brother . . . share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the Kingdom and the patient endurance. . ." (1:9).

In the midst of tribulation—and you can fill in what that means for you—we share the Kingdom.

We, like John, have seen the Kingdom of God, and,

consequently, we can no more be satisfied with the world than we can despair over it.

By the second coming of Jesus Christ we mean to say that in our past and present is a reality with ultimate implications.

Because we have heard the gospel, we listen for a trumpet.

The angel Gabriel stands on top of Riverside Church, his trumpet poised and his face lifted to the skies as if he were watching a jet take off from LaGuardia.

He is a parable in stone.

He stands firmly anchored to the storied past,
surrounded by the bustling present,
and obviously hopeful for the future.

His trumpet says that he has heard something, but his uplifted face says that he is looking for something out of sight.

His name means "man of God," herald of the Kingdom which is here and yet to come,
at hand,
around the corner,
the city that is new, yet named Jerusalem.

For eight months I saw Gabriel every morning and night.

I went to work and play and worship, and he stood there all the while, his trumpet ready.

The foundations of the church on which he perches grab the bedrock of Manhattan as if intending to stand there by the Hudson forever.

And all the while Gabriel has his head in the clouds.

The stained glass around his feet points to the past, to faraway places and antique times.

Every Sunday Gabriel hears the same old story,
told to people in well-worn pews,
who expect to go to work on Monday and come
back next Sunday.

They would be surprised to hear Gabriel toot his horn.
The days come and go, and Gabriel looks up into sun
and wind, sleet and snow.

He sees out of the corner of his eye that men still go
down to the sea in ships,
that the traffic becomes a little more hectic every
Friday afternoon, and that the park turns russet
autumn after autumn.

Summer and winter, seedtime and harvest, day and night,
vary no more than the traffic lights.

But Gabriel keeps his horn ready.

And so it must be, that in the midst of our city we look
for a city.

For the carillon plays and the people sing over and over:

"Oh God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come. . . ."

Our future rests firmly on our past.

Because stained glass points back to a stable and a cross
and three travelers on Emmaus road, Gabriel can lift his
trumpet.

It is what God has done that braces us for the living of
these days, though we can do no better in charting our
hope for the future than to use John's clouds and trumpets.

This hope, the hope of God's kingdom, enables us to
live in the present and face the future as John did, in
patient endurance, in that steadfastness founded in remem-
bering and expecting,

in that grace which sustains us at the Lord's table where we remember Jesus and wait in expectation.

The table is at once our confession that we cannot live our lives in the world by bread alone and our thanksgiving that God nourishes his people.

And so we are able to endure, doing our work in the world, because all our expectations are in God.

Disappointment and disillusion are built into merely human hopes.

So we face a discouraging world as did John, with no confidence in the world, but in "the Lord, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, who does not faint or grow weary."

It is they who wait upon the Lord who shall renew their strength.

I cannot say how you are to wait, for I do not know what you must endure.

It is likely, however, that we will endure by doing our duty,

that we will take the world seriously without taking it with utter seriousness,

that we will live out this year, and succeeding years, but not merely as 1970 that year which is 1970 anno Domini.

We will go on doing our push-ups and pushing pencils and making pies.

We will go to the dentist twice a year and do our homework, and save for our children's future.

For to wait on the Lord as if the world were of no account is to miss the Kingdom which is in our midst.

To neglect human things is to deny the First Coming,

the Incarnation by which God has hallowed earthly things and made our life all of a piece.

We wait not only in work, but in rest, for to know that the world passes away does not make us frantic to stay the days or to fear the future.

We know that the Word of our God stands, and so we pass our days in quietness and peace and at night go content to our beds.

We endure time as those who know that all our times are in his hands, past, present, and future.

But while we wait in work and rest, we mourn for the world.

The very fact that Gabriel is there is a symbol of our holy dissatisfaction.

Had John been content with things as they were, how would he have seen a new city?

And why should Gabriel raise his audacious trumpet in the midst of a city where all is well?

But all is not well, no more than in the old Jerusalem over which Jesus mourned.

And we are never so much in his company, nor so near to the pathos of Gabriel's searching eye, as when we weep over the daily newspaper, over the life of the world.

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

But our weeping is not that of sentimentality or of despair, for that is not the mourning which is in itself blessedness.

It is the comforted grief of those who have seen and who wait to see the salvation of God.

For while we mourn over the world, we know the meaning of the promise,

"Blessed are they that mourn. . . ."

We endure patiently as those who know that the valleys will be exalted and the hills made low, even as in Israel's crooked time a voice was heard:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people."

Everyone of us has his own Patmos, where he waits with John and Paul and Simeon and Rauschenbusch for the consolation of Israel.

Only you know your Patmos, and you will have to make John's vision your own, but the vision of faith makes possible our patient endurance.

Who knows this better than Dilsey, who does her duty in the world, knowing all the while that the world is coming to an end, the world where so much is wrong?

Dilsey is the old Negro servant, the mammy, in the Compson household, a family for whom life is all sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Dilsey is the only person in the family who will accept suffering, who will accept life as it is.

The book closes on Easter Sunday, 1928.

Dilsey begins the day by carrying wood, getting breakfast, and trying to maintain peace in the family.

There is a strange, dogged hopefulness about the woman as she ducks her gray head and heaves herself up and down the stairs at Mrs. Compson's whim.

But Dilsey gets her work done and goes off to church with her children and the feeble-minded Ben.

The path is uphill and leads among dilapidated Negro cabins.

The weather-beaten church stands against a gray Easter morning.

Inside are decorations of crepe paper and above the pulpit an old red Christmas bell, the kind that folds up like an accordion.

The people sing, and then a preacher in a shabby alpaca coat gives a sermon on suffering and Easter, all about the agony of the cross, and about the golden horns shouting down the glory.

Dilsey weeps quietly, rises, and leaves the church.

Approaching the big Compson house, with its rotting portico, Dilsey's children want to know why she weeps.

She tells them never to mind and continues to weep what seem tears of comforted sorrow.

Back in the kitchen, about her usual tasks, from which there is no escape, she talks to herself about having seen the first and the last,

the beginning and the end.

And Dilsey endures.

More than that, she lives joyfully, lovingly, in the world, for she knows the decisive truth;

Jesus Christ is Alpha and Omega.

She can endure time, indeed, fill it with joy, for she knows that her personal story is overshadowed by the story of God's salvation.

So Gabriel, lift your trumpet.

For though it often does not appear to be so, to eyes of faith it is clear, especially when we wait on Patmos,

or endure a world of rotting porticoes, that

"the Kingdoms of this world are become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Amen.

HYMN: *"O God, Our Help in Ages Past"*

"EASY RIDER"

Lesson: Matthew 21:1-11

Who knows why we go to the movies, and with such fascination and relief?

The theater itself is a kind of easy ride: a dark, warm place, smelling of self-indulgent popcorn,
where people are close but anonymous.

Riding with Captain America and Billy, I found myself rocking in a deep plush chair, traveling a thousand miles away from Durham,

and duty,

and life so daily and demanding.

The medium and the message met:

the movies, where you can be entertained by the human situation, while escaping from it, for about a dollar an hour;

and the story of those easy riders who take to the open road.

Billy and Captain America do not know themselves what they are looking for as they travel from Los Angeles to New Orleans.

There are only hints.

A tire goes flat, and they stop at a ranch in Arizona.

The rancher is shoeing a horse when they wheel in on their outlandish motorcycles.

They are welcome—beards, leather jackets, and all.

Their tire is flat: Sure, use the barn to fix it.

As simple as that.

It is noon; you are here; stay for lunch.

As simple as that.

The rancher, this man who earns his bread with his hands, bows his head to say grace with his wife and children over the plain food.

Simplicity.

The Captain and Billy think that they could live like that.

But they move on, through the unspoiled landscapes between California and Texas: pink sunrise, open fields, deserts, a shade tree in the heat of the day, mountains in silhouette, time to sit and stare as the sun goes down red.

They seem a million miles from Los Angeles.

Serenity, purity.

Easy riders, running from the rat race and billboards and crowds.

They spend a day or so at a youthful commune, somewhere out West.

Lean-faced young people sow seeds,
eat simple food together,
pray for daily bread,
and swim nude in pure water.

The children seem to belong to everyone.

Community—where people share work and food and prayer and play.

Old-fashioned words: simplicity, serenity, purity, community.

But the long-haired men on the chrome motorcycles are looking for just that.

Uneasy, out-of-place, they are looking for another country, and who of us cannot ride with them?

Captain America, the red, white, and blue sown on his jacket, is searching for America, for his own people who seem so far away.

Billy, dressed like Buffalo Bill, is looking for a lost era, a simpler day, the America we have all celebrated but not yet seen.

The movie is a kind of exercise in nostalgia, two young men trying to find the way back home.

But they end up shot to death by the side of a rural road in Louisiana.

It is hard to fix blame absolutely.

Surely it is unfair to stereotype the South as the movie does; violence is not Southern but American.

Or can we, off hand, exonerate the society which allows two hunters to carry a loaded gun in their pick-up truck?

Who will say that the man who pulls the trigger is very much different from the men he kills:
alienated, inarticulate, desperate?

And what about Billy?

Perhaps these Southern strangers are only teasing, making fun of long hair and Buffalo Bill clothes.

The pick-up pulls up alongside,
a shotgun out of the window,
a taunting remark.

Up goes the finger of defiance, and as quickly the shotgun explodes.

Billy dies for a gesture, just as he has suffered for style.

Looking on that final scene—the Captain and Billy dead on opposite sides of the road; smoke rising from the burning motorcycles, everything quiet; the pick-up moving indifferently back to town—we see through to what brought them to this, and we wonder if it was inevitable.

For the two young men we feel both admiration and pity: admiration for their style, pity that they have lived and died for a style.

Here rises the irony of our country: idealism and violence, the hope of life together in a Currier and Ives community, and the reality of our separation from each other; the wish for peace and love among us, and the absence of peace and love *within* us.

We are shattered when their search for home ends on a remote highway, amid burning rubber and the smell of gasoline.

From the start we had misgivings about their hope of finding a home, in Florida or anywhere else.

Peddling cocaine, they are willing, it seems, to exploit in order to escape.

What they need, we think, is a home, with people, and peace, with themselves.

What they set out to find is their own place, away from it all, paid for by pushing drugs.

We wonder if, after all, they ride easy at all, or if their shiny machines give them away.

The movie raises a clear question, theirs and ours: How do we overcome alienation?

How do we find our way back (they travel from West to East) to ourselves and our fellow man, to those *interior* landscapes of peace.

Can it be the way of the open road,
the pastel house in Florida,
the invulnerability of people who refuse to stay
with each other and to speak to each other?

Billy and the Captain are inarticulate, unable or unwilling to talk about their lives.

At moments when they might break through, they can say no more than a noncommittal "Man," which substitutes for honest expression and defends them from serious conversation.

Invulnerable (and therefore terribly vulnerable),
inarticulate,
and even disloyal to their own values,
they move from place to place, never finding a place where
they can open themselves, speak about their lives, and give
themselves to other people.

And so alienation grows to that acid-induced horror
among the tombs where sex is with strangers,
everything human is distorted,
speech becomes babble,
and coherent history, shared human story, disappears.

Peter Schrag, in an article about Main-Street America, has written about us in his description of life in Mason City, Iowa.

He suggests that alienation grows, that it is more and more difficult to feel at home in America:

"What do the kids in Mason City want to do? What do the kids in Iowa want to do? They want to get out. I'd get out, go to California if I could."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ "Is Main Street Still There?" *Saturday Review*, January 17, 1970, p. 21.

We feel it, and it is not just a matter of geography:
 there must be a better place,
 a better way of being with people,
 an unrealized America.

But I wonder if the easy rider will ever find that place,
 if any of us will ever find it by changing our address or
 opting out of what calls us here and now.

Perhaps home is where we become vulnerable,
 and speak to each other,
 and live a story together.

Could community be *in* Mason City? in Durham? in
 Los Angeles?

Could freedom be something which happens first *in* us
 so that we are *capable* of community, of staying with
 people *through* history?

Boris Pasternak lived through the Russian Revolution.
 He counts its cost to individuals rooted up from home
 and separated from family and friends.

He begins his novel *Doctor Zhivago*: "Man does not
 die in a ditch like a dog, but at home in history" ⁷⁰

History, he says, is the overcoming of death, and each
 of us participates by sharing in the human struggle.

Death and pain, like joy and peace, are always there,
 for us to share, to celebrate, and to interpret.

Sure, history presses us,
 people threaten us,

the way things work seems to work against us.

Pressed hard enough we may, like the Captain and
 Billy, dream of the open road,
 the idealized past,

⁷⁰ *Doctor Zhivago* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1958), p. 10.

our private place in the sun,
drugs.

But that is only fantasy, and far short of the freedom
which Jesus called purity of heart,
the willing of one thing, to do good to our brothers
as God has done good to us.

When freedom becomes an end in itself, it degenerates
to posturing,
license,
and preoccupation with the superficial.

Rather than riding easy, we try to *look* like we are
riding easy.

For example, a friend told me recently about browsing
in a shop which caters to the hip.

He asked if I had noticed the price tags on the latest
bell-bottoms and way-out shirts.

It can be very expensive to be hip.

Freedom can become an end in itself,

rebellion a way of life,

an expensive kind of defense against facing up to
oneself and living with people in the crunch.

Are not both freedom and community to be found
where we stay with our brothers,
and open ourselves,
and give ourselves?

The Captain and Billy ride out of history and opt out
of communication, only to ride into greater alienation and
finally to death.

Riding with them, we find ourselves trying to speak for
them, to give them the words which they have roused
in us.

And at the last we are reduced to agonized pity when Billy dies for a gesture.

Here is the final absurdity, where Billy and the Captain—who know that it is not the style of dress or cut of hair which counts—where they die not for a cause, or for a person, but for defiance itself.

They die away from home,
on the side of the road,
at the hands of strangers.

Our freedom is *in* history, absurd as that may seem,
sticking with each other, talking with each other.

As Samuel Beckett knows, even while waiting amid absurdity for Godot who never comes, we can at least talk with each other about our lives.

Freedom and community are the same, growing from the determination to be *for* each other, believing that God is there, where men will to be for each other, even for the man who out of his alienation seems not to be for us.

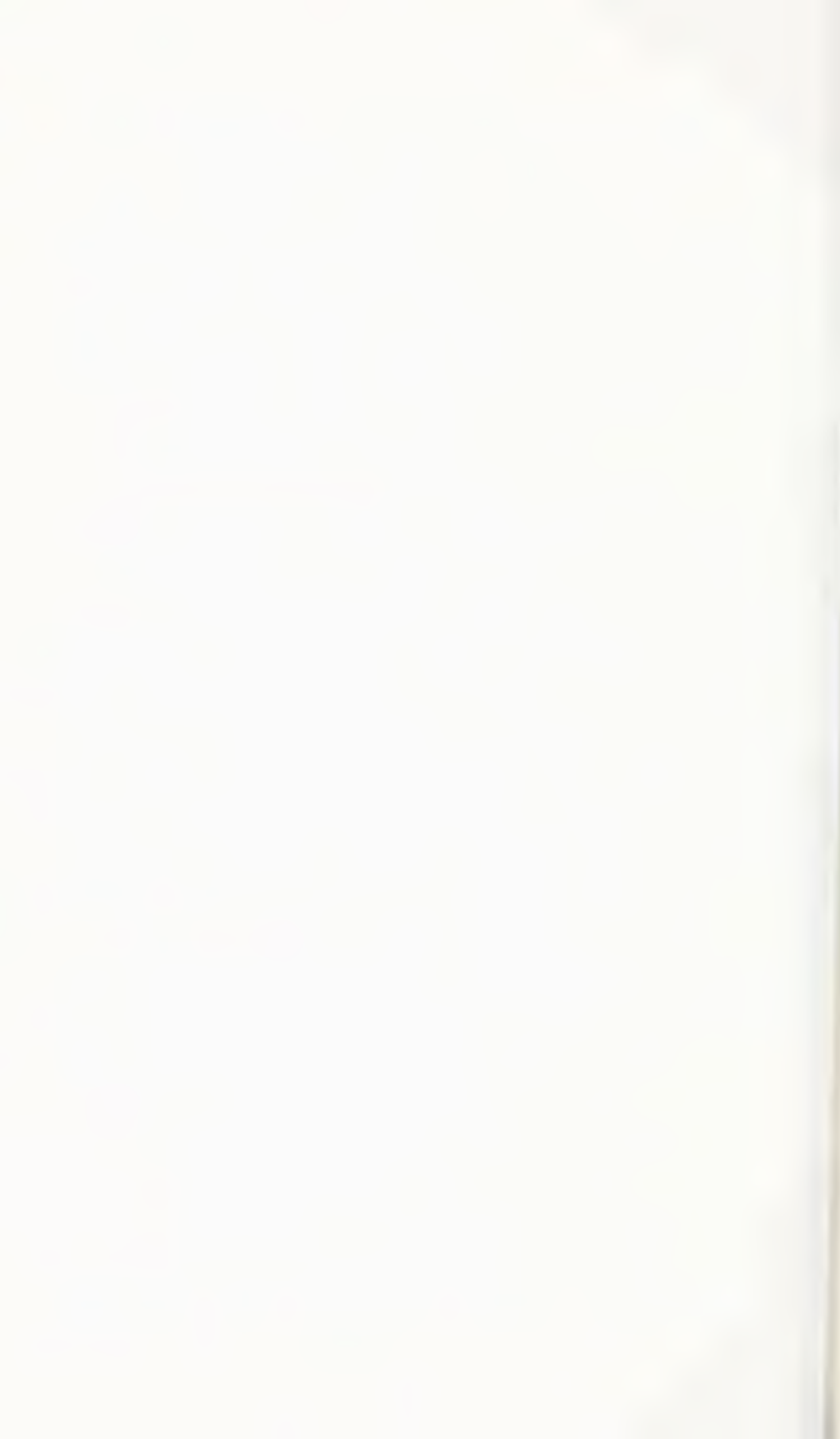
Easy rider indeed, he comes riding quietly on a donkey, amid portentous landscapes and hosánnas that will turn soon enough to hostility.

But he rides easy, his own man,
free to speak words that help,
to stay with people,
vulnerable in the face of threat,
free to give his life.

He rides free because he is pure in heart, a man for others.

His freedom is that he belongs to God and man, that he dies as he lives, not for a gesture, but for us.

PRAYER: *Come, O Lord, to all the uneasy riders. Bring us home to you, in whose service is perfect freedom, for the sake of him who was king even on the donkey and crowned even on the cross, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*



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